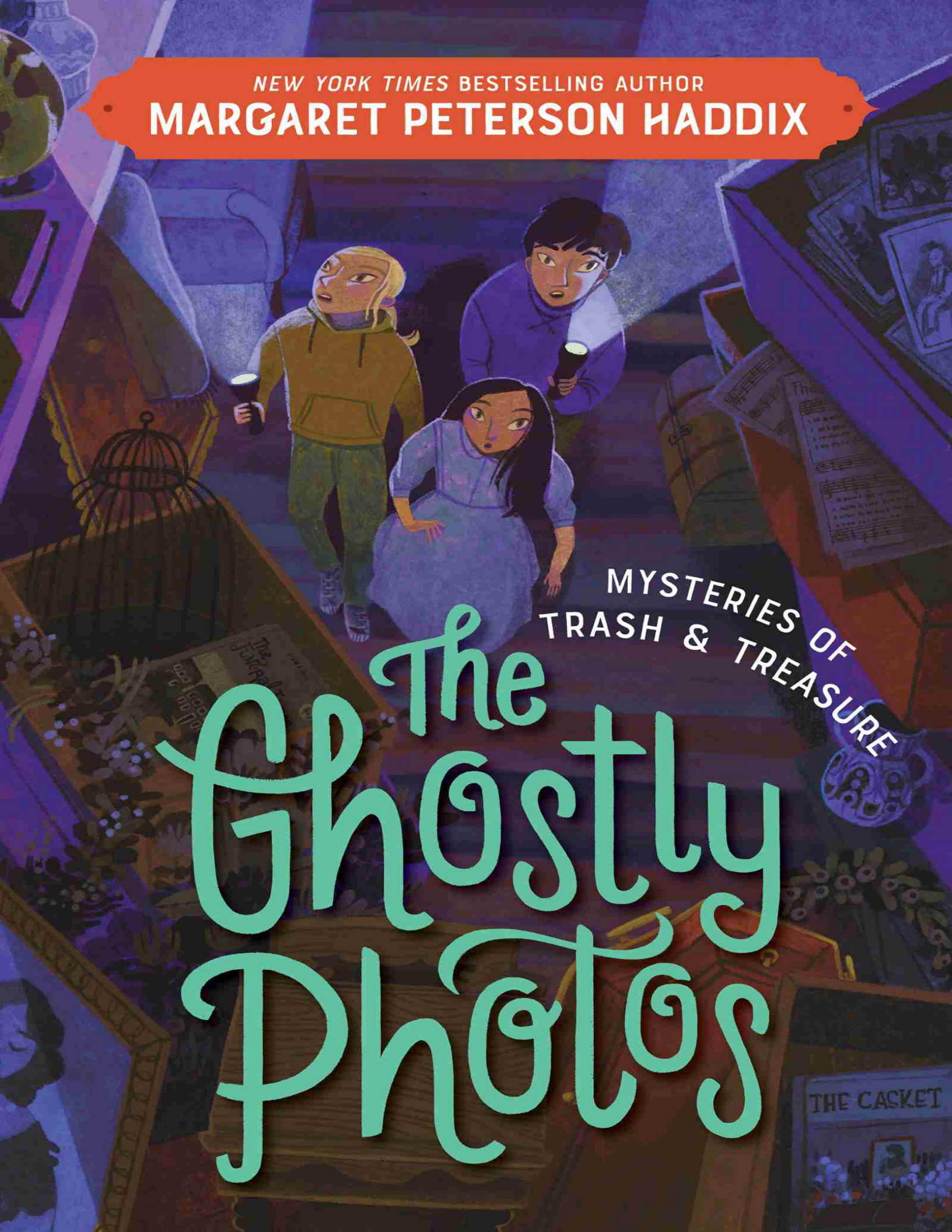


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX

The Ghostly Photos

MYSTERIES OF
TRASH & TREASURE



MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX

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TRASH & TREASURE

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KATHERINE TEGEN BOOKS
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Dedication

For Debbie

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The Beginning

Colin and Nevaeh became friends because of a shoebox.

Or, actually, two shoeboxes. Also: two attics, two families, two crying babies, Three Brothers, three mysteries about kids from the past, and lots and lots of junk.

Then they went into business together.

They solved mysteries for anyone who asked.

And that was . . . not quite as much fun as they expected.

Who knew the people around them could have so many . . . boring . . . mysteries?

Then Serena Lane showed up.

Clutching a shoebox of her own.

And asking, “What do you know about ghosts?”

1

The First Time Anyone Saw Serena

“Maybe this wasn’t such a great idea,” Nevaeh said, peering around at Groveview, Ohio’s first ever Zucchini Festival. It was basically just a dunking booth, a collection of rickety kiddie carnival rides, food stands surrounded by a greasy haze, and two ramshackle rows of tents and booths and tables.

“What wasn’t a great idea?” Colin asked. “Coming to the Zucchini Festival? Paying to have our own table here? Or . . . starting our own business?”

“All of the above?” Nevaeh’s voice rose at the end, as if she were one of those kids who made every word into a question. And that was totally *not* like Nevaeh. Normally she was bold and brave and confident. Just a few hours ago, she’d been all but grabbing people out of the crowd to tell them, “You want to hire Colin and me—I know you do! I bet you have all sorts of mysteries you’d love for us to solve!”

But in the past two hours, they’d found just one potential new customer: a man who wanted help finding his Netflix password. When Colin suggested making up a new one instead, the man had stared at him, muttered, “What? You can do that?”—and then left without paying.

Not that Colin and Nevaeh really would have charged for that advice. But still.

The smell of fried zucchini wafted over Colin, mixing unpleasantly with the smell of sweat and bug spray and sunscreen. The empty seats of the Ferris wheel swung and creaked, high overhead, and it gave Colin a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach. He could hear the current “victim” in the dunking booth—some teacher from the high school—taunting the

crowd, “Come on! Try to dunk me! Don’t you want revenge for that F I gave you on your last history report?”

He wouldn’t say that if he really had flunked someone in the crowd, Colin thought anxiously. *Would he?*

Colin was twelve; he hadn’t even had to deal with middle school yet, let alone high school. But this summer he’d started wondering about all sorts of things he might not have even noticed before. A lot of those things were good: He wasn’t bold and brave like Nevaeh, but he’d managed to act that way a time or two. Because of that, he’d met Nevaeh; they’d become friends and helped patch up a friendship between two people who’d had a falling-out nearly fifty years ago, as twelve-year-olds themselves.

But Colin had also found out secrets about his own family he sort of didn’t want to know. Or . . . he’d half found out the secrets, and he and his mom had agreed he knew as much as he needed to. For now.

But someday, a voice whispered in Colin’s head. Someday I’m going to want to know more. . . .

“It’s just,” Nevaeh said, gesturing toward the next row of tables and makeshift booths, “we left Prilla all by herself.”

Colin jolted. He’d gotten kind of lost in his own head and had almost forgotten the conversation with Nevaeh. He had a tendency to do that. But now he gazed over at the next row of tables and booths, where signs advertised replacement windows, plumbing snakes, life insurance, and other things that Groveview residents apparently wanted more than mystery solving, judging by the crowds around them. And Nevaeh was right. Her older sister, Prilla, was indeed all by herself, at a card table with a taped-on sign that said: “Want to hire TWO great companies at once to clear out your overstuffed house? Ask ?????s and sign up here!”

Colin’s mom and Nevaeh’s dad both owned junk-removal companies. But they took very different approaches. Colin’s mom’s company was called Possession Curation, and she focused on helping people pare down their belongings to only the items they truly cared about. Nevaeh’s dad was the Junk King. He was all about finding new uses for old things, new buyers for items other people might throw in the trash. For years, Colin’s mom and Nevaeh’s dad had viewed each other as competitors—enemies, even.

It had been Colin and Nevaeh’s idea for their parents to start working together as partners.

Colin widened his gaze. Just to the right of Prilla's table, Nevaeh's dad and her three older brothers stood in a booth with signs all over the place practically shouting, "THE JUNK KINGDOM" and "GOT JUNK YOU DON'T WANT ANYMORE? THE JUNK KING WILL TAKE IT! I LOOOOVE JUNK!" It kind of hurt Colin's eyes. Also, everyone in Nevaeh's family looked alike, with their thick, dark blond hair; wide, constantly surprised-looking brown eyes; pale, prone-to-freckling skin; and mouths that always seemed to be open or on the verge of grinning, laughing, or calling out a joke. So just about every time Colin saw one of Nevaeh's siblings, he did a double take and had to remind himself, *No, that's not some weird sci-fi version of Nevaeh who's years older and maybe even a different gender. It's just that Nevaeh has brothers and a sister. She's not an only child like me. Remember?*

Colin slid his gaze past Prilla to the left, where his mother stood alone in her own company's booth, which looked sleek and classy and quiet and peaceful and . . . a little empty. Colin and his mom looked alike, too, with dark, curly hair and deep-set eyes. But Colin had always been tall for his age, and his mother was tiny. She didn't take up much space, even in her own booth.

"Prilla can hold her own," he told Nevaeh, a little brusquely. He really wasn't thinking about Prilla at all.

"I guess." Nevaeh slumped down in her folding chair and let out a small sigh. Then suddenly she bolted upright. "Quick. Two o'clock," she muttered, speaking out of the side of her mouth like a spy or a gangster.

"It's not two," Colin argued. "Check your phone. It's at least—"

"I'm not talking about time," Nevaeh countered, still keeping her lips mostly pressed together, as if she were telling secrets. "Direction."

"Oh, right." Colin resisted rolling his eyes. Nevaeh was probably the only twelve-year-old on the planet who gave directions based on where the hands of an old-fashioned clock might point. But Colin had been hanging out with her most of the summer—he knew to turn his head just slightly to the right.

And he understood instantly what she wanted him to see: a girl in an odd purple dress was staring at him and Nevaeh. Staring *hard*.

Or maybe the girl was actually staring at the sign they had in front of their table, the sign Colin himself had carefully lettered:

MYSTERY SOLVERS, INC.

Nevaeh Greevey and Colin Creedmont, Owners

We find: Lost friends and relatives * Lost pets * Lost items

We help with: Other mysteries and dilemmas

The girl seemed to feel Colin's gaze on her. She gave her head a little shake and looked away. Colin had done that particular move a million times himself. She might as well have shouted, *Who? Me? Stare? I'm not staring! Why would anyone accuse me of staring? Leave me alone!*

But then the girl jutted her chin into the air, a power move that Colin never would have attempted. This motion seemed to say, *Yeah, I know you're watching me now. So what? Watch all you want!*

"Hey!" Nevaeh called, even though the girl was a good fifteen or twenty feet away. "You're welcome to come over and ask questions! We're here for anyone who thinks they need our help!"

The girl turned her head again, but only enough to barely make eye contact. She opened her mouth, touched the tip of her tongue to her teeth, then brought her lips together once more. And then she turned away and faded back into the crowd.

It took Colin a moment to make sense of what he'd seen.

"Did she just mouth the word 'Later' at us?" he asked, still not quite believing his own eyes.

But Nevaeh wasn't listening. She bolted to her feet, knocking her chair over behind her.

"Hey!" she called again, starting to scramble past the edge of their card table as if she intended to chase after the girl. "Hey! We don't bite! We—"

Nevaeh stumbled and rammed into the table. The piles of business cards and brochures they'd arranged so carefully slid across the table and rained down onto the ground. Nevaeh and Colin both rushed to pick up the cards and brochures before anyone trampled them into the dirt.

And when Colin looked back up again, the girl in the purple dress was gone.

"Did we both just imagine that?" Nevaeh asked, as if she'd had trouble believing her own eyes, too.

"I saw a girl in a purple dress that looked like it was made out of . . . I don't know, velvet?" Colin said. "She was about our age. She had long,

straight dark hair and dark eyes and . . . would you call it a smirk on her face?”

“Okay, we both saw the same thing,” Nevaeh said, as if that was a big relief. “Except . . . are you sure the dress was velvet? Who wears velvet in July? Or wears a dress at all at a *zucchini* festival?”

Colin, Nevaeh, and everyone else around them were wearing T-shirts and shorts. Before purple-dress girl, the most formal person they’d seen the entire day was the Groveview mayor, who’d cut a ribbon and given a sappy speech to open the festival. And he’d just been wearing a golf shirt and khakis.

“Wish I’d taken a picture,” Colin muttered. He’d really gotten into photography lately. Sometimes the pictures seemed to reveal things he hadn’t seen with his bare eyes.

Nevaeh squinted, as if she could imagine the photo he might have taken.

“Was there another girl behind her?” she asked doubtfully. “Another girl in a dress, but a lot younger, like, only seven or eight, and her dress wasn’t nearly as fancy, and—”

“There was!” Colin agreed. He frowned, remembering. “But except for them both wearing dresses, they didn’t seem connected, so I thought . . .” He snorted, figuring it out. “I know! That girl must be even worse at babysitting than I am!”

Colin’s only experience with babysitting had been tagging along with Nevaeh. And the only “work” he’d actually done was pushing a stroller.

“That’s not how you treat a kid you’re getting paid to babysit,” Nevaeh countered, wrinkling her nose. “Ignoring her completely, like that? That was an older sister being forced to take care of a younger sister, and she doesn’t want to, and the younger sister thinks she’s old enough to go around on her own, so she was ignoring her big sister, too. . . .”

“Maybe,” Colin said, unconvinced. Nevaeh knew a lot more about sisters than he did. But he’d also watched Nevaeh around her siblings, and even when they were ignoring each other—or annoyed or mad at the others—they still seemed connected, as if they had invisible puppet strings drawing them together. Nevaeh and her brothers and sister squinted the same way; they waved their hands in the air the same way when they talked. Even if they all dyed their hair different colors and put in colored

contacts and somehow altered their face shapes with makeup, it would still be clear to anyone that they were siblings.

Purple-dress girl hadn't seemed connected like that to anyone around her.

Nevaeh started straightening the piles of brochures and business cards they'd reassembled on the table.

"At least we didn't waste any of these," she said. "Though, at the rate we're going, we'll still have enough left to pass out at the *fiftieth* annual Zucchini Festival. People are just interested in the zucchini doughnuts and the rides. Nobody wants to hire us."

"Maybe not here," Colin admitted. "But, remember, we did find Mr. Sudowski's car keys a few weeks ago, and we found the address for Mrs. Conroy's second cousin once removed when she accidentally threw her address book in the trash, and—"

"Mr. Sudowski's car keys were *in his car*." Nevaeh rolled her eyes. "And just about every other mystery we've solved, the adults we were helping could have figured things out for themselves if they were better at using Google."

"Yes, but—"

"Do you two actually solve mysteries, or do you just talk about them?"

Colin jumped.

Purple-dress girl was back. She was standing right in front of their table now.

How had he missed seeing her walk toward them?

"We solve mysteries," he said firmly.

Purple-dress girl plunked an ancient-looking black shoebox down on the table in front of them. But she didn't open it. She kept her hands around it, holding it together. She might as well have put up a "Keep Out!" sign on it.

"What do you know about ghosts?" she asked.

Colin shivered. Given the way she'd crept up on them, he wasn't entirely sure that purple-dress girl herself wasn't a ghost.

But Nevaeh being Nevaeh, she just looked purple-dress girl straight in the eye and challenged, "What does anyone know about ghosts? Seems like that's more a field where people *believe* things or *suspect* things, not *know*. What are you looking for—ghostbusters? Exorcists? We don't do paranormal. We stick to the real world."

Purple-dress girl grinned. Her dark eyes glowed.

“Good,” she said. “That’s what I want, too.”

“So do you have a mystery for us to solve?” Colin asked.

“Sure do.” Now purple-dress girl flipped the lid off the shoebox. She tilted the box forward, so Colin and Nevaeh could see into it.

“I want you to help me prove these *aren’t* pictures of ghosts,” she announced.

Colin watched the pictures sliding toward him in the box. He had a clear view of only the photo on top. It showed a boy in old-fashioned clothes lying in a coffin. But the boy seemed to have a ghostly shadow—another, more faded version of himself in the same clothes, sitting up and staring out, his mouth open, as though he were calling for help. In the picture, the boy seemed to be both lying down and sitting up, all at the same time.

Colin gulped.

“But what if that really is a ghost?” he asked.

2

Serena's Story

“Maybe you better back up and tell us where you got those pictures,” Nevaeh said. Because, honestly, if she let Colin keep talking, he was going to lose this job. “Why don’t you start by telling us your name?”

“Oh, sorry,” the girl said. She pointed to herself, brushing a lace collar. “I’m Serena Lane. You can call me Ree.”

Good grief, Nevaeh thought, looking Ree up and down. Colin was right—her dress is velvet. Velvet and lace. . . . Is she one of those girls who’s all about taking pictures of herself for Instagram, and she thinks she’s going to be some big influencer from Groveview? And maybe she’s just talking to us so she can make fun of us on her site?

Maybe Nevaeh wanted Colin to lose this job for them.

But then Ree cast a glance over her shoulder, as if worried that someone might see her talking to Colin and Nevaeh. That could have made Nevaeh even warier. But there was something so lost about Ree’s glance, something so sad and mysterious.

Nevaeh made a snap decision.

She stood up and reached over the metal bar separating her and Colin’s table from the next one over, where someone who’d gone to school with Nevaeh’s older brother Axel had a sign claiming he could fix any cell phone problem in thirty minutes or less.

“Mind if we borrow your extra chair?” Nevaeh asked. She didn’t wait for an answer, just grabbed the folding chair and lifted it over the bar. She settled the chair alongside hers and Colin’s, and patted the seat invitingly. “Come back here with us, so you can tell us the whole story,” she told Ree.

And so you can hide, if that’s what you want, Nevaeh thought.

Ree threw one more glance over her shoulder, snatched up the box of pictures, and dodged around the table much more gracefully than Nevaeh had done moments earlier. But when Ree got to the empty chair, she turned it around so she could keep her back to the crowd.

Interesting, Nevaeh thought. She wanted to raise an eyebrow at Colin, or blink at him to send a secret message: *Do you see her body language?* But Ree was watching Colin and Nevaeh so carefully. She would have noticed.

"I just moved here," Ree said, settling into the chair. She kept the box clutched on her lap. "This box was in the attic of our new house."

"People leave behind all sorts of things in attics," Colin said sagely. "Nevaeh and I have a lot of experience with that."

He made it sound like the two of them had spent decades—rather than just a matter of months—helping their families clean out attics. And yet, this was the first summer for both of them doing that.

"Yeah, well, I bet you don't have experience with a house like mine," Ree said. She cast another nervous glance over her shoulder and held the box tighter.

"Why do you say that?" Nevaeh asked.

"Umm . . .," Ree began. She bit her lip. "It's a really old house—like, more than a century old. And—"

"Oh, we deal with old houses all the time!" Colin interrupted reassuringly. "We—"

Nevaeh stepped on his foot to get him to shut up.

"Go on," she told Ree.

"It's a funeral home, all right?" Ree said. "I live in a funeral home now. And it's hard enough that . . . well, never mind. I can be okay with living in a funeral home. I can handle it. I'm not a baby. I'm not a coward. I can . . . be supportive of my mom, if this is what makes her happy. But I am *not* living in a haunted funeral home. If it's haunted, I refuse!"

"I don't blame you," Nevaeh said.

She tried to think of something else to say to get Ree to calm down. But, really, didn't Ree deserve to be upset? Who wouldn't be upset, moving into a funeral home they thought might be haunted?

The carnival ride operators chose that moment to crank up the music of the merry-go-round. The tooting and whistling of the calliope music should have sounded cheerful and carefree. But it was hard to hear it that

way with the word “haunted” still echoing in Nevaeh’s ears. Once again, Nevaeh wanted to catch Colin’s eye. She wanted to have a private conversation with him. But this time, what she longed to tell him was, *This girl needs more help than we can give her, don’t you think? Can’t she tell we’re just kids, and we’re really just playing at being able to solve mysteries?*

It was so hard being twelve. Sometimes Nevaeh felt like she was capable of anything, but no one would give her credit or even listen to her ideas. And other times, Nevaeh felt like she didn’t know anything about anything, and it was really unfair when people treated her like she should.

This whole afternoon at the Groveview Zucchini Festival, Nevaeh had been flipping back and forth between thinking, *Why won’t anyone take us seriously?* and *This is embarrassing—what if someone actually takes one of our brochures? What if they try to hire us for something we can’t handle?*

Ghosts—or potential ghosts—definitely fit in the category of things Nevaeh didn’t know how to handle.

Beside her, Colin cleared his throat.

“People used to take pictures of dead people all the time,” he said, sounding amazingly calm. “It was a thing, a hundred years ago or so.”

“I know that!” Ree snapped.

“You do?” Colin said, as if that was a surprise.

What if he offended Ree, and she just got up and stomped away?

“Colin’s not just being, like, a mansplainer,” Nevaeh said, defending him. “He really does know a lot about photography. And, I guess, the history of photography.”

Colin started to reach for the box of pictures.

“Maybe if we go through all those pictures one by one,” he said. “Maybe then we’ll figure out—”

Ree jerked the box back, hugging it tightly against her chest. She threw yet another worried glance over her shoulder.

“Not here,” she said. “What was I thinking? This won’t work.”

“You were thinking we could help,” Nevaeh reminded Ree. And . . . reminded herself. Nevaeh was a Greevey, and Greeveys liked helping people. Even if they weren’t always sure how.

“Okay, okay . . .” Ree seemed to be trying to calm down. She took deep breaths. But she kept an iron grip on the box.

This was starting to feel like a standoff.

“Where would you feel more comfortable showing us the pictures?” Colin asked gently. “You may not have found Groveview’s library yet, but sometimes we—”

“No!” Ree looked panicked again. “Not anywhere public! It has to be . . .” Suddenly her expression smoothed out. She smiled. And then she raised her eyebrows in a way that made her expression seem mischievous. Or maybe evil. “You have to come to my house. If you want to prove that I’m not living in a haunted funeral home, you have to be *in* the house.”

“We can do that,” Colin said immediately. “Right, Nevaeh?”

Wait—Colin’s not afraid? He’s leaving it up to me to be the one who chickens out?

Nevaeh gulped.

“Just tell us when, and we’ll be there,” she said.

And if her voice sounded a little faint—a little ghostly—she fervently hoped no one else noticed.

3

Serena's House

The house was huge.

Colin and Nevaeh stood across the street staring at it, just an hour later. They didn't have to check any house numbers against the address Serena had given them because there was also a scalloped sign out front, with the words "Lane-Rhodes Funeral Home" in elegant, curlicued script.

"I don't know why she said she lives in *a* funeral home," Nevaeh said, sounding awed. "She should have said she lives in *the* funeral home. The one everyone knows."

"She's new," Colin said, as if apologizing for Serena.

He had no clue how many funeral homes there were in Groveview. But this was the one kids made jokes about when they passed it on the school bus—"You keep bugging me, you're going to end up *there*!" The jokes were never funny, and Colin had noticed they kind of stopped the year that one of their teachers had cancer. That year, there had been times the whole bus went silent, passing the funeral home. But the teacher was fine now, and the jokes had come back.

If you didn't think of it as a funeral home, the house was also *amazing*. It was a style that Colin thought might be called Victorian—because of some English queen, a long time ago? It had two turrets that looked like upside-down ice-cream cones, and extra wings that jutted out at the sides and back that made him think of pictures he'd seen of cathedrals with flying buttresses. Cheerful summery flowers were planted in beds all around the house: daisies and marigolds and zinnias.

But there was also a hearse in the driveway, a big, black car that clearly had room in the back for a coffin. Or—who could say? Maybe there

actually was a coffin in the back, and Colin just couldn't see it because of the tinted windows.

"Have you ever been inside a funeral home before?" Colin asked Nevaeh. "Ever been to a funeral?"

"My grandfather's," Nevaeh said. "And for some other people my parents knew but I didn't. Not really." She shrugged. "You know. Dad knows everybody in Groveview. Dead or alive."

Even Nevaeh was trying to make a joke about the funeral home.

Colin didn't laugh.

"My grandparents died before I was born," he said. "The grandparents I know about, anyway." Because there was such a huge black hole in his life connected to his father, he didn't know anything about his father's family. "My mom's never taken me to anybody's funeral. I guess we're lucky? Not to know anybody who died?"

Now he was doing that thing where he was making simple facts into questions.

Nevaeh patted his arm.

"Look," she said. "I know you're dying to see all those pictures Ree had in the box. Oops—sorry—didn't mean to do that. 'Dying' . . . ha ha . . . I mean, you *want* to see the rest of those pictures. But maybe we can just call up this Ree girl and tell her if she really wants to hire us, we have some terms she has to agree with, and one of them is *not* going into that funeral home until we have to. We can say it's better to look at the pictures in a neutral location, and—"

"Ree didn't give us her phone number," Colin reminded her. He held up his own phone, where he'd typed all the directions Ree had given them. "And we forgot to ask."

"Ugh," Nevaeh said, hitting her forehead with the palm of her hand. "Don't tell my dad I forgot the first rule of customer contact." She squared her shoulders. Colin had known Nevaeh long enough now to recognize this as her "Okay, whatever. I'm taking charge" signature move. "The longer we stand here, the harder it's going to be. Come on."

She grabbed his arm and tugged, and Colin let her pull him along.

"Ree said to go in the back door," Colin reminded her, once they were across the street. "Because"—he gulped—"there might be a funeral going on, and we can't interrupt."

“Looks like there *is* a funeral going on,” Nevaeh said. She pointed toward the rows of empty cars lined up behind the hearse. All of them had a little purple flag attached to their hoods with some sort of magnet. Each flag had the word “Funeral” written on it in white lettering. Colin squinted in confusion, and Nevaeh explained, “People will go from the funeral here to the cemetery for the burial, and they’ll drive in one long line that nobody’s supposed to interfere with. The flags let people know what’s happening. These cars will be allowed to go through red lights and everything.”

“Oh,” Colin said. “I didn’t know that.”

They cut through the row of cars and darted around toward the back of the house. Here, the flower beds weren’t quite so perfect. An old sign leaned against the side of the building, its faded paint making Colin remember that the funeral home used to be called Taggart’s Funeral Parlor. This sign included a line of script that bragged, “Serving Groveview since 1902.” The back door, when they reached it, wasn’t imposing carved wood like the front, but a flimsy screen in a metal frame.

“She really said we should just walk right in without knocking or ringing the doorbell?” Nevaeh asked.

“Right,” Colin said.

It still felt like they were doing something illegal when they pushed open the door. Now they were in a tiny, old-fashioned kitchen.

“Ree?” Nevaeh called softly. “Hello?”

“She said we should meet her upstairs, remember?” Somehow, Colin couldn’t manage to make his voice louder than a whisper. “Because that’s where her family lives, and the whole first floor is just the business, and . . .”

And why did Ree have to tell us that the basement is where they prepare the bodies? Colin thought. *So we’d be sure to go up, not down, the stairs?*

He decided not to say that to Nevaeh. She was already heading up a narrow staircase, and Colin followed.

“Funeral feet, please,” someone said ahead of them, and Colin practically jumped out of his skin.

But it was just Ree, grinning at them from the top of the stairs.

“Oh, sorry,” she said. “I can tell you two didn’t grow up having to be quiet all the time while funerals were going on. ‘Use your funeral feet’ is

what my mom and grandma used to tell me all the time when I was a little kid—funny how it just came back to me. . . .”

To Colin’s relief, the second floor of the funeral home was full of sunshine and light and giant windows. A long hallway lay behind Ree, lined with doors. At the other end of the hallway, Colin could see the curved banister of another, grander staircase at the front of the house.

As soon as Colin got to the top of the kitchen stairs, Ree reached back to shut the door behind him.

“Okay, now we don’t have to worry about noise so much,” Ree said. “There’s a lot of soundproofing in this house, between the floors.”

“I thought you said you just moved here,” Nevaeh said, almost accusingly, as if she was looking for holes in Ree’s story. “Why did you have to worry about having funeral feet even when you were a little kid?”

“Oh, my mom—and my grandma, too—they always worked in funeral homes,” Ree said. “This is just the first time it’s been a funeral home where we’ve *lived*, too.” She crinkled up her nose like she’d thought of something funny. “Want to know the whole story? We’re here now because my mom fell in love at a funeral directors conference.”

“Bet that doesn’t happen very often,” Nevaeh muttered.

“Oh, you’d be surprised.” Ree’s eyes twinkled. It was amazing how much more relaxed she seemed here than she’d been at the Zucchini Festival. She led them into a room that didn’t look like anyone had unpacked it yet. Except for a single twin bed and a scattering of brightly colored beanbag chairs, everything else was in boxes. Ree plopped down in one of the beanbag chairs and gestured for Colin and Nevaeh to do the same.

“It all started as a joke,” Ree went on. “My mom’s last name is Lane—you probably figured that out—and Harvey, my new stepdad, his last name is Rhodes. And so these other funeral directors were talking about the worst funeral home names they’d ever heard, and they said to Mom and Harvey, ‘You two should get together. You could call your company “Lanes, Roads, and Other Journeys.”’ Get it? Journeys? Like . . . death?”

Colin decided he didn’t like funeral-home humor.

“Okay . . . ,” Nevaeh said, as if she didn’t understand, either. “So . . . that’s why they got married?”

“No—that’s just why they started talking,” Ree said. “That was the first time my mom had gone to one of those conferences without my

Grandma Hal, and I guess Mom was kind of lonely. And she found out that she and Harvey had both always dreamed of owning their own small-town funeral home instead of working for some chain, and . . .” She shrugged. “Do your parents make sense to you? Do the things *they* do seem logical?”

“Let’s talk about the pictures you were going to show us,” Colin suggested quickly.

“Sure.” Ree rose from her beanbag chair and went to one of the stacks of moving boxes. She lifted the flaps on the top box and then shoved aside a layer of clothes, before pulling out the black shoebox she’d shown Colin and Nevaeh before.

She’s been keeping that box and those pictures hidden even in her own house? Colin thought. *Even in her own room?*

Then Ree began to spread the pictures out on the floor in front of Colin and Nevaeh, and Colin forgot everything else.

Each picture showed the same boy, again and again. Some of the pictures were a little fuzzy, so it was hard to make out his exact features. But he had a thin face and close-cropped hair that might have been dark brown or black. In every picture, he wore a white shirt and suspenders and pants that looked like they were made out of tweed and buckled at the knee—were they the old-fashioned type called knickers?

Every picture was in black-and-white, not color—Colin would have to look up when people started using color film a lot. Was it the 1950s? The 1960s?

In almost every photo, the boy was lying down, usually in the same creepy, old-fashioned coffin. But even in the one photo where the boy was standing up—or maybe it was just that he’d been propped up to look like he was standing—the boy had his eyes shut, and his skin seemed unnaturally pale.

He always looked dead.

“Wait, where’s the picture you showed us before?” Nevaeh asked. “The one where it looks like there’s a ghost escaping from his body?”

“I’m going in order,” Ree said.

“Of when they were taken?” Colin asked excitedly. “Do you have the contact sheet or the negatives from the original film?”

Both Ree and Nevaeh looked at him like he was speaking a foreign language. Colin was about to explain what he’d learned reading about how

photography was done before digital cameras. But then Ree answered his question, and he snapped his mouth shut.

“No,” Ree said. “I’m going in order of what’s creepiest.”

She put the “ghost coming out of a dead body” picture down on the floor.

I shouldn’t think of it as a picture of a ghost, Colin told himself. I should tell Nevaeh she shouldn’t call it a ghost. That, like, prejudices us. There’s got to be a logical explanation.

He leaned in closer, ready to study every detail.

But Nevaeh was still staring up at Ree in horror.

“You mean—that’s not even the creepiest picture?” Nevaeh asked.

Colin saw that Ree was still holding one more picture in her hand.

Silently, she lowered it to the floor.

In this one, there appeared to be two boys side by side in the coffin. But the coffin was blurry and out of focus, and the boys’ shoulders almost seemed to overlap.

Colin snapped his fingers.

“Double exposure!” he shouted. “That’s all this is! That was a way to do trick photography, in the old days when people used film. See, you’d just take two pictures in a row without advancing the film—this is just the same boy, photographed twice in different poses, and—”

“Then why does it look like one of the boys is dead and the other’s alive?” Nevaeh asked, her voice trembling.

Just then, a door slammed somewhere down the hall, and all three kids jumped.

“That was just the wind, right?” Colin asked.

Neither Nevaeh nor Ree answered him. But a wavery voice came through the wall: “Who are you? Who’s there? Who’s in my room?”

4

The Voice

Nevaeh scrambled to her feet and took off running for the door. Her thoughts felt twisted: Was she running for the stairs to get out of this terrifying place once and for all? Or was she going to be brave—and maybe foolish—and run toward the next room over to see where that voice was coming from before she left?

She glanced back over her shoulder. Colin seemed completely frozen in place, still sitting in front of all the ghostly pictures.

Wherever I'm running to, I cannot just abandon Colin, Nevaeh thought.

She circled back and bent down to grab him by the arm.

“Come on!” she yelled at him.

Maybe she was planning on just running away in terror, without checking anything.

“Stop!” Ree cried. “That’s just my grandmother! Grandma Hal!”

“Hello?”

It was the wavery voice again. But this time, it did sound like an elderly woman, not a maybe-ghost.

“Please . . .”

This wasn’t a scary voice. It was someone who was scared herself.

“Let me go talk to her,” Ree said. She looked down at the pictures scattered across the floor, then back at Colin and Nevaeh. It almost seemed as though Ree was frightened, too. She gritted her teeth and added, “Please don’t leave until I get back.”

She slipped out the door.

Nevaeh let go of Colin’s arm.

“I didn’t really think it was a ghost,” she told him, defensively.

“I didn’t know what to think,” Colin said.

For a moment, they were both silent. Colin still stared down at the pictures on the floor. Nevaeh cocked her head slightly. It wasn’t that she was trying to eavesdrop on whatever Ree was telling her grandmother, but . . .

Okay, I really am trying to eavesdrop, she told herself.

She cleared her throat, ashamed.

“Didn’t you kind of think, from the way Ree was talking about her grandmother, that her grandmother was dead?” she asked Colin. “Because her grandmother *used* to work in a funeral home, like her mom, and her grandmother *used* to go to all the funeral home conferences, too. . . .”

“So now you think it’s Ree’s grandmother who’s a ghost?” Colin asked.

Nevaeh felt like she’d lost all her courage cred with Colin in one fell swoop.

“No!” she protested. “I just . . .”

It seemed like she had to eavesdrop now. She stepped closer to the wall. She could hear Ree speaking in a loud but soothing voice in the next room: “Grandma Hal? Did you wake up and not remember where you are? It’s just me. Your granddaughter. Serena Elise. Ree. Remember? You love me. I love you. I’m here now. You’re fine. We’re together.”

“Maybe her grandmother has Alzheimer’s or something like that,” Colin whispered. He’d stood up and crept over beside Nevaeh. So he was listening, too.

Nevaeh nodded. The way Ree kept saying “Remember?” again and again made Nevaeh’s heart ache.

“We should go over there and introduce ourselves,” she told Colin. “Show that we’re—I don’t know—friends? Or friendly, anyway—not *just* interested in having Ree pay us for solving her mystery. Make her and her grandmother feel welcome, since they just moved here.”

“I guess,” Colin said. “Just . . . give me a minute.”

He took his phone out and went back to the pictures on the floor. Nevaeh realized he was taking pictures of the pictures, hovering over one after the other.

“Oh—that’s smart,” Nevaeh said. “But shouldn’t you let Ree know you’re doing that? Get her permission?”

“I’ll tell her in a minute,” Colin said. “I can always delete them, if it bothers her.”

“But if she comes back and sees you doing that—”

“Oh, right,” Colin said.

He straightened up and put his phone back in his shorts pocket.

“You artist types,” Nevaeh teased. “Always wanting to get the picture while the lighting’s good, or before you remember to eat . . . or before you have to meet someone’s grandmother. . . .”

Colin blushed. Nevaeh was pretty sure he wouldn’t agree to meet Ree’s grandmother at all, if Nevaeh wasn’t insisting.

It’s not just about being friendly, Nevaeh thought. *There’s something going on with Ree that she’s not explaining. I can tell. It’s something big. Maybe if we meet the rest of her family, we can figure it out. . . .*

They stepped out into the hallway, which seemed shadowy now. The sun must have gone behind a cloud.

Nevaeh discovered she was tiptoeing. And hunching over, like she was trying to hide in the shadows.

You’re being ridiculous, Nevaeh told herself.

She straightened up and knocked at the first door she came to. She meant to make it a gentle knock, a “sounds like your grandmother might be sick, so I’m being quiet and super polite” knock. But “gentle” wasn’t exactly one of Nevaeh’s main character traits. The knock echoed loudly down the empty hallway. And apparently the door hadn’t been shut all the way because it also sprang completely open, hitting hard against the wall.

“Oh, sorry,” Nevaeh said quickly. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

Ree was perched on the side of a big double bed across the room; she was bent over as though she might be stroking the hair or patting the hand of someone in the bed. Nevaeh’s only impression of the woman in the bed was of salt-and-pepper grizzled hair and distressed gray eyes. Because Ree immediately whirled around and sprang to her feet.

“You were supposed to wait in my room!” Ree rushed toward Nevaeh and Colin, as if she intended to shove them out of the bedroom.

“We just thought it would help if—” Nevaeh began.

“Did you invite friends over to play, Harmony?” the woman in the bed asked, not sounding so quavery anymore. “That’s fine, as long as they know to be quiet during the funerals. No TV or radio on during the services, remember?”

“*Harmony*”? Nevaeh thought. *Has Ree been lying to us even about something as basic as her name?*

“We’ll use our ‘funeral feet,’” Colin said, like he’d been dropped into some role-playing game and was proud of remembering his lines.

“What a polite young man,” the woman said. Nevaeh still could barely see the woman’s face, because it was so lost in the pillows and comforter. But Ree’s grandmother—if she really was Ree’s grandmother—seemed to be struggling to sit up now. “Why don’t you bring your friends over to introduce them to me?”

Ree twisted back and forth, as if she couldn’t decide whether to rush back to the bedside or continue running toward Nevaeh and Colin. She opened her mouth, then shut it. She seemed to be breathing especially hard.

And . . . it wasn’t just Nevaeh’s imagination, was it? Were Ree’s eyes filling with tears?

“I’m Nevaeh Greevey, and this is Colin Creedmont,” Nevaeh said, taking a step toward the bed. Maybe it would help if she just tried to act normal. “I guess you just moved to Groveview? Welcome. I hope your whole family likes it here. Especially you and . . .” What was Nevaeh supposed to call Ree? “. . . uh . . . your granddaughter?”

Even to her own ears, Nevaeh’s words sounded stilted and awkward and weird. But she didn’t expect Ree’s reaction.

“No, no, no, no, no,” she moaned. She turned back toward the bed only long enough to say, “Grandma Hal, this is just a dream, all right? You just had a happy dream.”

Then she ran toward Nevaeh and Colin, waving her hands and frantically calling, “You’ve got to leave.”

“Okay, sorry—we’ll just go back and wait in your—” Nevaeh began.

Ree was already herding them out into the hallway. She pulled the door of her grandmother’s room shut firmly behind all three of them. Nevaeh turned toward Ree’s room.

“No, not there!” Ree shook her head urgently. Or maybe she was looking back and forth between the front staircase and the door to the back stairs, trying to decide which way to go. “I mean, *leave* leave. Get out of the house completely.”

She grabbed hold of Nevaeh’s and Colin’s arms and began tugging them toward the back stairs. For a moment, Nevaeh even wondered if Ree intended to *throw* them down the stairs.

“What’s wrong?” Nevaeh asked. “What just happened in there? You can tell us. We came here to help. We *want* to help!”

“No, no—it’s too complicated,” Ree moaned. “This was a mistake, inviting you here. I messed up. You want to help? Then get out of here, as fast as you can. If anyone sees you downstairs, then . . . just say you were at the funeral, and you got lost looking for the bathroom. Please! Don’t tell anybody you saw me or my grandmother. Don’t even say my name to anyone. Forget you met me. That’s the only way you can help!”

“But—”

Ree had the door to the back stairs open again. She let go of Nevaeh’s and Colin’s arms. She didn’t shove them down the stairs. But her face was so anguished, so scared. She pressed her finger over her lips and seemed to be listening. There was no sound below except, distantly, organ music. Ree waved her arms in a “Go, go, go!” motion. She mouthed something—was it “Funeral feet”?

Nevaeh and Colin took off running down the stairs.

5

The Humiliation

There was no one in the kitchen. But Colin and Nevaeh were so infected by Ree's fear that they kept running: out the back door, past the flower beds and the old sign, along a cracked sidewalk . . .

"No—not toward the lineup of cars!" Nevaeh whisper-shouted. "The funeral people will see us there! Let's go around the other side!"

Colin spun around and followed her. They veered around the opposite corner of the funeral home and hunched over, running past windows. They were almost back to the street.

"Nevaeh, stop! This makes us look guilty!" Colin hissed. "Like we stole something and are running away, or—"

"You're right, you're right. . . ."

Nevaeh slowed her pace to a fast stroll. They reached the sidewalk that ran parallel to the street and turned onto it.

"Look at us, just two random innocent kids who haven't stolen anything or done anything wrong." Nevaeh raised her knees unnaturally high as she walked; she swung her arms as if trying to appear carefree. "We haven't just run out of a funeral home that might be haunted. We don't even know that's a funeral home over there. Doo-ta-doo-ta-doo, we're just having just an ordinary day here in Groveview. . . ." She even added a fakey whistling.

Isn't there some old-fashioned expression that Mom uses sometimes—something like "That's just whistling past the graveyard"? Colin thought.

He'd never quite understood what that expression meant.

Anyhow, he didn't think Nevaeh was fooling anyone.

He stopped and leaned forward, propping his hands on his knees as he caught his breath.

“Did we just get fired?” he asked. “Before we really even started the job?”

Nevaeh stopped beside him.

“That’s one way to put it,” she said. Her face was red and sweaty. But Colin couldn’t tell if it was from running or being embarrassed. “Another way is . . . maybe the whole thing was just some sort of trick?” She looked around, as if expecting to see someone jump out from behind a tree, waving their phones and yelling, “Surprise! We’re so going to put this on TikTok!” She gulped. “I could see my brothers trying to fool me like that. Axel and Dalton might, anyway. And I do know some mean kids from school who like playing pranks. Don’t you?”

Colin didn’t really want to admit that none of the kids from school would have cared about him enough to play a trick like that.

You’re friends with Nevaeh now, he reminded himself. You’re not alone. You don’t have to worry about what anybody from school thinks.

“Did you see Ree’s face right there at the end?” he asked. “That wasn’t a kid just acting scared for some other kids’ trick. She really was afraid.”

“Of what?” Nevaeh asked. “The ‘ghost’? Her grandmother? *Us*?”

“Or was there something she saw out the window?” Colin asked. “Didn’t you notice, right before she started telling us to leave, she was facing the window, and . . .”

Colin couldn’t quite re-create in his mind what had happened, what he’d seen. Ree’s shoulders had stiffened. She’d jerked her whole body alert.

“I missed that,” Nevaeh admitted. “Could you tell what she was looking at?”

“I was too far away.”

Both Colin and Nevaeh turned back to face the funeral home, as if whatever Ree had seen might still be there. Colin checked the second-story windows first, just in case Ree or the grandmother were looking out.

Or the “ghost” is, he thought ruefully.

All the second-story windows were blank, covered by shades or drapes.

“Wait a minute—weren’t all those windows uncovered before?” Colin asked. “Wasn’t that whole floor sunny and—”

“Colin! People are starting to leave the funeral!” Nevaeh whispered urgently. She tugged on Colin’s arm. “We can’t let them see us staring!”

Colin wasn't staring, exactly. But even as he moved forward, he kept watching the people trickling out of the funeral home, heading solemnly toward the cars with the purple flags. There were older men in stiff suits and women in dark-colored dresses; women his mom's age wearing black pantsuits; a few younger men in khakis and button-up shirts. He wished he could take a picture, or maybe film a video, because just the way the people moved looked sad. It was like they were all weighted down. Some of the women—and the men, too—dabbed at their eyes with tissues, even as they walked.

"Earth to Colin," Nevaeh whispered. "Now there's a whole bunch of people *ahead* of us! Coming back from the Zucchini Festival, I guess. Watch out!"

Colin swiveled his head and dodged to his right just in time to avoid two little kids running down the sidewalk with helium balloons bobbing above them on strings. The crowd behind the kids seemed as bouncy as those balloons, everyone in bright-colored shorts and T-shirts, some of them still holding bags of cotton candy.

Now Colin wanted to take pictures of *both* crowds, the people leaving the funeral and the people leaving the festival. He could imagine pairing up pictures from each group, maybe finding a person in each crowd who kind of looked like someone in the other crowd, only one was crying and the other was laughing, and . . .

And that would be a lot like that one picture Ree showed us where one boy looks dead and the other looks like he's alive, Colin thought.

He jerked back.

"Nevaeh!" he said. "I still have all those pictures of the ghost on my phone. Even though I never got Ree's permission and—"

Nevaeh frowned and resolutely turned her back on the funeral home.

"I guess you should delete them," she said. "Ree—or whatever her name really is—she made it *totally* clear she didn't want to hire us, after all. 'Forget you met me'? It doesn't get much stronger than that. And if it was just a trick?" She looked around and began speaking in a much louder voice. "Yeah, I could tell right away she was trying to fool us. But I was just playing along."

Colin waited until a large pack of kids about their age passed by, and then he half whispered, "It wasn't a trick. It was the most interesting mystery we've gotten since the Rosemary and Toby letters."

“Are you talking about the mystery of those ‘ghost’ photos?” Nevaeh asked. “Or the mystery of why Ree was acting so weird?”

Colin let himself glance back at the funeral home one more time.

“Both,” he said. “And you and me—we’re going to solve them both.”

“But she *fired* us!”

“We’re not doing this as a *job*,” Colin said. Now he was the one who sounded sure of himself. “Not for pay. We’re doing this because . . . don’t you really, really want to know?”

For a moment, Nevaeh just stood there.

Then she lifted one hand . . .

And fist-bumped him.

They were doing this.

6

Nevaeh's Discovery

“Where have you two been?” Dad asked as soon as Nevaeh and Colin got back to the festival.

He did not look happy. Nevaeh noticed that all the booths and signs and tables had already been taken down. Even the one where Nevaeh and Colin had been sitting. Now practically all of Nevaeh’s family—and Colin’s mom—seemed to just be standing around.

Apparently waiting on Nevaeh and Colin.

“We, uh, were checking out a job offer,” Nevaeh said.

“Just one?” her older brother Dalton sneered. He was nine years older than her—twenty-one, a grown adult—but he teased her sometimes as though he were still a kid, too. “You sat there the whole afternoon and only one person wanted to hire you?”

That made it so that there was no way Nevaeh could tell the whole story about how, technically, they’d also just been fired. She shot a glance at Colin to make sure he didn’t talk, either. But he was hanging his head as his mom scolded, “Colin, why didn’t you and Nevaeh answer our text messages?”

“We didn’t get any. . . .” Nevaeh glanced down at her phone. The screen was indeed full of texts. “Oh, sorry. We had our phones on silent. While we were working.”

“Colin, it’s time to go home,” Colin’s mom said in a clipped voice that made Nevaeh think she was mad, too.

Usually Nevaeh really admired Colin’s mom. Even before Nevaeh had met Colin, Nevaeh had daydreamed about living a neat, orderly, tidy life like Mrs. Creedmont’s, not one that revolved around junk, like the Greeveys’ did. But Nevaeh couldn’t always figure out Mrs. Creedmont.

Why did it seem like Mrs. Creedmont was much angrier than Dad, even though Mrs. Creedmont had a small, tight smile on her face and Dad was scowling?

“Okay, Colin, I’ll see you . . .” Before Nevaeh could even add “tomorrow,” he and his mom were already walking away. But Colin looked back over his shoulder and pantomimed pointing at his phone, then at Nevaeh. So they’d text each other. They’d make plans. They’d be fine.

And they could work together to solve the mystery of Ree and the ghost photos.

Somehow.

“Nevaeh, how about you help me carry this table to the truck?” Dad asked.

Nevaeh obediently picked up one end of the long table. She waited until she and her dad were out of earshot of the others—especially Dalton—before she apologized, “Dad, I didn’t know it was so late. I—” Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of the clock on the courthouse tower. “Wait a minute. I thought you all were staying in the Junk King booth until six. It’s not even five thirty yet. Colin and I weren’t late at all!”

Dad shifted to carrying the table one-handed so he could scratch his beard.

“Someone from the chamber of commerce came around and told us all to leave early. The festival bands that are playing tonight needed extra time to set up.” He shrugged. “Not that we were drumming up that much business, anyhow.”

“So that’s what you and Colin’s mom were really mad about,” Nevaeh said, relieved.

“No, I think Felicia was mad at me,” Dad said. He seemed to be choosing his words carefully. “Look, honey, I know you and Colin are friends, and we *are* making more money from working with the Creedmonts. But I’m not sure this business partnership is going to last. Felicia’s approach and mine—they’re too different! She’s just so . . . brisk. She barely even talks to *me*, let alone the customers!”

So that’s why Dad wanted to pull me aside from everyone else, Nevaeh thought, her heart sinking. So he can break it to me that my brilliant idea isn’t working.

First her business with Colin seemed to be sunk. Then Ree—or whatever her name really was—kicked them out of her house. Now Dad

wanted to stop working with the Creedmonts?

Nevaeh was not going to stand for it. Not *any* of it.

“Dad!” Nevaeh dropped her end of the table for emphasis. To make Dad turn around and look at her. “Aren’t you and Mom always telling us we have to get along with other people? Colin and his mom, they’re just a lot quieter than us Greeveys.”

A brass band would be quieter than Nevaeh’s family. Especially when all seven of them got together and were all talking at once. Nevaeh had been completely out of her element at the funeral home, where she was supposed to keep even her feet quiet.

But she knew how to handle Dad now. She smiled sweetly and said, “And if you’re making more money working with Mrs. Creedmont, can’t you put up with her being a little quiet?”

Dad stamped his feet in pretend exasperation.

“I hate it when you kids turn our own advice back at us,” he muttered. “You’re right, you’re right . . . it was just a long afternoon.”

They went back to carrying the table.

As the youngest of five kids, Nevaeh almost never had her dad completely to herself. If he could use this time, so could she.

“Hey, Dad, I was wondering,” she began. “Have you ever done a Junk King pickup at the funeral home? The one on Main Street, I mean?”

“Are you planning Halloween decorations already?” Dad asked. “Hoping for something genuinely scary? No, I’ve never done a pickup there. I like staying away from funeral homes, thank you very much.” They reached the Junk King truck, which was parked up the block from the festival grounds. Dad let down the tailgate and the two of them slid the table into the back. “Not that I wouldn’t mind getting my hands on some of their antiques. That funeral home was in Old Man Taggart’s family for more than a century, and as far as I can tell, for all the furniture he had stuffed into that house, there was only one thing that ever came out of it.”

“What?”

Dad smirked.

“Dead bodies.” He lowered his voice, making it spooky. “Including . . . Old Man Taggart’s.”

Nevaeh groaned and rolled her eyes.

“Da-ad,” she complained. “I’m being serious here!”

“So am I,” Dad said. He waggled his eyebrows in a “I’m about to tell a creepy story” way. “Rumor has it, he keeled over on the job and landed right in somebody else’s coffin. While they were in it. And then—”

Nevaeh didn’t even want to think about that tale. Sometimes with Dad, you had to redirect.

“Do you know the new people who bought the funeral home?” she asked.

“No. Er—wait. Sort of. They came to the last chamber of commerce meeting. Harvey Rhodes and . . . enh, I don’t remember the wife’s name. Seemed like a nice couple, but they acted like they mostly just wanted to find out when the Zucchini Festival would and wouldn’t be noisy, so they could work funerals around it.” Dad scrunched up his face. “Can you imagine that being your job? Dealing with dead people and all their grieving relatives? Give me my junk kingdom, any day.”

Before Nevaeh had a chance to answer, a burst of microphone feedback came from the festival grounds, followed by a riff of electric guitar. It was so loud, Nevaeh had to put her hands over her ears.

“Whoa. Guess I can see why they were worried,” Dad said. “Hmm. Let’s go see.”

He started leading her down a narrow alley between two houses.

“See what?” Nevaeh asked. “Where are we going?”

“Past the funeral home,” Dad said. “I’m on the chamber of commerce, and I assured Harvey and what’s-her-name that the loud music wouldn’t start until seven. If there is a funeral going on, we need to stop the music.”

“The funeral home is over there,” Nevaeh said, pointing back toward the corner and the route she and Colin had taken along Main Street.

“This is the back way,” Dad said, stepping past weeds growing through the disintegrating pavement of the alley. “Takes me back to high school, going this route. My group of friends, we used to drive down this alley at midnight, so we could pass the funeral home and dare each other to—” He seemed to remember who he was talking to. “You know what? Never mind. I will just assure you right now that nothing we did was illegal. We were only trying to terrify each other in a harmless way. Pre-internet, remember? So many fewer entertainment choices.”

Nevaeh could have asked follow-up questions, but she could tell from the houses they were passing from the back that Dad was right about the

directions. He led her to a thick row of trees, and both of them peeked through a gap in the branches.

On the other side of the trees, the funeral home—the house Nevaeh had been kicked out of barely an hour ago—towered above them. But the large, lush backyard led up to a driveway that was now completely empty. Both the hearse and the lineup of purple-flagged cars were gone.

“That’s a relief,” Dad muttered. “Oh, hey, looks like they’re getting rid of the old Taggart Funeral Home sign. Suppose they’d be willing to sell it? I can think of some people who might buy it as a nostalgia item. Souvenir of our high school wanderings . . .”

Nevaeh ignored him. Because just then, she saw a tall, thin, balding man push his way out the same back door that Nevaeh and Colin had run through. This man, though, was carrying two brightly patterned bowls and calling back over his shoulder, “Yes, we *purposely* had someone else handle the cemetery trip so we could have dinner as a family. So tonight we are *all* sitting down together.”

A disgruntled-looking teenage boy followed the man out the door. Behind him, the same little girl Nevaeh had seen at the Zucchini Festival with Ree tripped down the steps.

That’s proof of . . . something, Nevaeh thought.

Neither kid looked much like Ree. Where Ree’s hair had been straight, these kids both had curly hair. They both had slightly darker skin, too.

More like the dad, Nevaeh thought. *Oh, wait—this is probably her stepdad. Ree said her mom just got married.*

So were these kids Ree’s stepbrother and stepsister?

Nevaeh pushed her eyes a little closer to the gap in the branches. Now she could see a bit more off to the side, where there was a picnic table and a dark-haired woman standing by a grill. This woman did look a little like Ree: same narrow face, same straight nose, same wide eyes.

“The burgers are ready!” the woman called. “Turkey, veggie, and beef! Who wants what?”

“Blended family, blended traditions,” the man said, a tight grin on his face. He seemed to be trying to convince the kids behind him that they wanted a family dinner together as badly as he did.

“Nevaeh,” Dad said, tugging on her arm, pulling her back from the thick line of trees. “It’s really kind of rude to—”

Dad’s phone started to ring, and he grabbed it quickly.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said into it, stepping back away from the trees and the funeral home’s backyard. He was also speaking much more softly than usual. “I haven’t forgotten you. We’ll be over for that junk pickup in . . . let’s say forty-five minutes?”

He motioned for Nevaeh to follow him back down the alley.

Nevaeh nodded but held up a finger. She was bargaining that Dad was distracted enough by the call that he wouldn’t notice if she spied on the funeral home just a moment longer. And that the noise coming from the Zucchini Festival was loud enough that no one at the funeral home had heard Dad’s phone and *wouldn’t* be looking in this direction. She chose a different gap in the tree branches to peer through this time, one that gave her a clear view of the entire area around the picnic table and grill.

The woman was sliding a plateful of burgers onto the table. The two kids and the dad had settled into their seats. Now that Nevaeh could see the whole picnic table, she could also tell that a small, frail-looking, gray-haired woman—Ree’s grandmother?—was sitting alongside them. While Nevaeh watched, they all joined hands, as if they were about to pray. It was like a portrait of family togetherness, a vision of a united, complete, happily blended family.

Nevaeh remembered what the man—Ree’s stepdad?—had said only moments earlier: *Tonight we are all sitting down together.*

And yet Ree was nowhere in sight.

7

Colin's Discovery

"Is something wrong?" Colin asked as Mom actually squealed the tires, driving around a corner on the way home. "Are you okay?"

For a second, his mom looked like she was going to pretend nothing had happened. She kept her gaze directed straight ahead, as if driving the familiar streets of Groveview demanded her entire attention. Then she banged her hand against the bottom of the steering wheel.

"I know it makes good business sense to work with Nevaeh's family, but her dad can be so infuriating," Mom said.

This was new—Mom actually confiding in Colin when she was upset.

Or maybe it was just new that Colin would ask questions like *Is something wrong?* and *Are you okay?*

"Yeah, Nevaeh's dad loves junk and you hate it," Colin said carefully. Colin hadn't quite ever admitted to his mom that he was getting more and more fascinated by the junk they found, too. If Mom thought Mr. Greevey was infuriating, what would happen if she found out that Colin was so . . . disloyal?

Mom frowned. And then, for some reason, she reached over and patted Colin's leg.

"That wasn't the problem today," she said. She took a deep breath, as though she was about to confess something. "It was . . . oh, I guess he was just trying to make conversation. But he started asking if I'd heard from your dad lately, if I knew how he was doing."

"Oh," Colin said. He gulped. "Maybe he just doesn't know you don't like talking about Dad."

"He knows," Mom said, glowering at the windshield.

That made it impossible for Colin to ask, *Do you ever talk to my father? Do you have any idea how he's doing? Would you tell me if you did?*

They got home, and Mom sat down to answer work emails. Colin drifted back to his bedroom. He sprawled across his bed and took out his phone. He meant to text Nevaeh, but something about the conversation with Mom made him not want to communicate with anyone right now.

Instead, he flipped over to the pictures he'd taken at the funeral home: his copies of the photos of the boy in the coffin. The boy propped up but still looking dead. The boy with what looked like a ghost coming out of his chest. The second image with what seemed to be two boys, one looking dead, one alive.

Was Nevaeh right to begin with, and I really should delete these because I never got Ree's permission? he wondered briefly.

But it wasn't hurting anyone for him to look at these pictures again. Even if Ree had fired him and Nevaeh, it wasn't harming her for Colin to keep thinking about this boy—or these boys?—from so long ago.

The boy's face looked so sad in every picture. And so *still*. It didn't make any sense—these were pictures, not video, of course—but in all the pictures where the boy looked dead, he seemed so motionless. But in the pictures with the doubled images, the second boy looked like the type who couldn't sit still; he looked like he'd been caught in the middle of moving.

He looked so alive.

Am I just imagining that, or can you really tell that from a picture? Colin wondered.

He clicked over to the internet and started searching for “pictures of dead people.” This led him to “pictures of dead people—Victorian era” and “pictures of dead people alongside living people.”

He paused to type a text to Nevaeh: **Did you know that in the 1800s they would take pictures of dead people with their eyes shut, but then actually PAINT eyeballs on the eyelids????**

He sent her a screenshot of the creepiest example that he could find.

She didn't answer.

Okay, maybe Nevaeh's not staring at her phone right now like I am, Colin thought.

Or maybe she was trying to decide how to tell him that none of that helped with the mysteries *they* were working on.

For all he knew, maybe the pictures Ree had shown them back at the funeral home were all copied over onto some remote genealogy site on the internet, and he could search for days looking for “old pictures of dead people” and still never find them. Unless . . .

Colin jerked back so dramatically that he almost fell off his own bed.

“Thank you, Mrs. Tsai!” he muttered.

Mrs. Tsai had been his elementary school librarian, and she’d tried really hard to teach all the sixth graders how to tell truth from lies on the internet.

One of the lessons had been about how to detect when a photo had been tampered with online—when, say, there was a picture of a politician supposedly ripping up the Constitution or kids swimming around completely unaware of a shark below them. Or that famous fake photo of someone supposedly on top of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, with a plane in the background behind them.

Reverse-image search, Colin thought.

If it worked to bring up proof that pictures had been tampered with online, maybe it would also work for pictures that had been tampered with before the internet existed.

He went back to the picture he thought was likeliest to be fake—the one with the “ghost” rising out of the dead boy’s chest. He copied it into a search engine and . . .

Nothing.

He tried again with the picture of the two boys together.

Nothing.

He tried again and again.

Nothing, nothing, nothing.

He was on the last photo, the plainest one of all, where it was just the one boy lying in the coffin: eyes shut, face sunken, hair barely more than fuzz, everything about him looking dead, dead, dead.

And there was a result.

Colin read and read and read. And then, his hands shaking, he typed a quick text to Nevaeh: **I found the boy from the ghost photos online!!!! I know when and why those pictures were taken.**

Colin hesitated for a second, and then he added another line:

I know how he died, too.

8

Sharing

“Tell me everything!” Nevaeh breathed into her phone as soon as she saw Colin’s message. Texting back was way too slow. “I’ve got news, too, and —”

“Oh, Nevaeh, thanks for calling,” Colin said, his voice oddly stiff and formal. “Mom and I were just about to have dinner, though, so I’ll have to talk later.”

This was code. This meant: *My mom can hear everything I say, and I don’t want to have to explain what we’re doing.*

Nevaeh was on the verge of saying, *Your mom won’t care! Spill!*

But she didn’t know what Colin had found. Maybe his mom *would* mind.

Nevaeh glanced ahead of her, where Dad was still on the phone. The two of them were walking back down the alley toward the truck and the Zucchini Festival, away from the scene Nevaeh had just witnessed at the funeral home. Nevaeh didn’t exactly want Dad to overhear her talking about what she’d seen, either. He’d already scolded her for spying.

It was so annoying to have parents constantly around.

“Okay, tell your mom . . .” Nevaeh waited for a second while another burst of electric guitar music came from up ahead. “I’ve got it. Tell your mom you heard a rumor there’s a band you really love performing tonight at the Zucchini Festival, and you’ve *got* to come back over here.”

“But I didn’t—” Colin began. This was code for *I’m not going to lie to my mother.*

“Colin,” Nevaeh said. “I’m telling you the rumor *right now*. You *are* going to love coming back for the bands.” Whoever was playing the

electric guitar hit a sour note, and Nevaeh winced. “Just not necessarily for the music.”

“Okay, okay. . . .”

Now Nevaeh just had to make sure she could get permission to stay at the Zucchini Festival.

This proved surprisingly easy. When they got back to the festival area, Nevaeh’s older sister, Prilla, volunteered to stay, too.

“Okay, but Colin’s meeting me here, and we’re going to want to walk around on our own, so—” Nevaeh began warning Prilla.

Prilla mussed Nevaeh’s hair.

“Got it, kid,” Prilla teased. “You’ve got your social life. I’ve got mine. No spying on each other.”

“Right,” Nevaeh agreed. “I mean, we can hang out together until Colin gets here—”

But just then, someone behind them said, “Is that the amazing Greevey sisters I see ahead of me?”

Both of them turned around. But it was just Deepak, one of the teenagers who sometimes worked with Colin and his mom, moving junk.

“Heyyy!” Prilla said, in an oddly bright, cheerful tone. Her voice sounded like sunshine. Or like she’d just met a celebrity.

“Did you come to hear Three-D make its worldwide debut, playing in public for the very first time?” Deepak asked. Maybe it was just the reflected glow from the cotton candy trailer, but was Deepak actually blushing?

“No way!” Prilla squealed. Generally speaking, Prilla was not a squealer. “You really managed to talk the other two into playing tonight? And Three-D is the band name you settled on? You took my suggestion?”

“Of course we took your suggestion,” Deepak said. He was definitely blushing, his brown skin taking on a reddish glow. “It was brilliant.”

Oh, Nevaeh thought. Oh, oh, oh.

Prilla and Deepak clearly had a crush on each other. Though “crush” felt like the way Mom and Dad would describe it. And that was such a silly word—but Prilla and Deepak were acting strangely silly. And neither of them were silly people.

It was a little hard to watch.

“Why don’t you two walk around together, and I’ll go find Colin,” Nevaeh said.

“Okay, later,” Prilla said, barely glancing in Nevaeh’s direction.

Deepak raised his hand in a half-hearted wave, without taking his gaze off Prilla.

Nevaeh looked back once as she walked away, but Prilla and Deepak seemed to have forgotten she existed.

Nevaeh wandered toward the Ferris wheel and the collection of little-kid rides. Absolutely nobody else was walking around alone. There were family groups—exhausted-looking parents prying children away from the merry-go-round, alternating threats and promises: “If you don’t come now, we’ll just go straight home without stopping for ice cream. . . . Don’t you want ice cream?” And then there were clumps of teenagers. Even the ones who were saying “This is such a stupid festival” looked like they were having fun together.

And even the kids Nevaeh knew didn’t really look at her. It almost seemed as if they thought being alone might be contagious.

Is this what it would feel like to be a ghost? Nevaeh wondered. Not to be noticed? To feel so different and outside of things, always?

Nevaeh reminded herself she didn’t actually believe in ghosts. Not really.

Her phone dinged with a text from Colin saying, **I’m here. Where are you?** And it was such a relief to rush over to meet him. The music from the bands was so loud now that they ended up walking over to sit on the courthouse steps a block away.

And finally—finally, finally, finally—Colin shoved his phone into Nevaeh’s hand and just let her read everything. The screen showed a headline over one of the pictures from the funeral home: “Boy’s Body Found by Railroad Tracks.” Below the picture, there was a news story:

Local farmer Abner Dell was checking animal traps on his property near the edge of the railroad right-of-way when he made a grisly discovery Monday evening. His hunting dogs ran toward a suspicious lump in the cattails, and it turned out to be a boy’s dead body.

“Must have been some runaway lured to his death by the hobo life,” Sheriff Earl Reeser told the *Groveview Press*. “Hopping trains is dangerous, and we’ve got to let these boys know that.”

Sheriff Reeser speculated that the boy could be from anywhere in the country, but he is doing his best to identify the body.

“Somewhere out there, there’s a mama with a broken heart,” he said.

The boy has brown hair, brown eyes, and a thin frame—but there’s no telling if he was so skinny before leaving home. He was wearing dungarees and a red plaid shirt. He had no shoes.

Oscar Taggart of Taggart Funeral Home volunteered to embalm the body, so when the grieving family is located, they will be able to hold a funeral and bury their beloved son.

Anyone who thinks they might know this boy is advised to go to Taggart’s to see the body. Or contact Sheriff Reeser with information.

“And tell any relatives you have in far-off places about this,” Sheriff Reeser added. “Ask them if they’ve heard of a missing boy. Show them this picture, if you can. This is one of the saddest cases I’ve ever worked on, and I won’t rest until I have this boy laid to rest in peace, with his loving family at his side.”

“This story was in the newspaper on October 28, 1930,” Colin said.

“The sheriff’s right—this was so sad,” Nevaeh whispered.

Her heart lurched, as though she’d just learned that someone she actually knew had died.

“Maybe . . . maybe I was kind of hoping that your big discovery was that everything about those pictures was a hoax, and the boy was just pretending to be dead,” she said.

“I know,” Colin said. “Because . . . he did look alive in that one double exposure, didn’t he?”

“If this was from 1930, and the boy was at least—I don’t know? Nine or ten? Eleven or twelve?—he’d still be over a hundred now,” Nevaeh said. “So he’d probably be dead by now, regardless.”

“But he shouldn’t have died at nine or ten,” Colin finished for her.

Nevaeh looked away from Colin and his phone. “Hopping trains” and “the hobo life”—Nevaeh knew what those were. Her dad was always making her watch TV specials about history. Back in the 1930s, during the Great Depression, lots and lots of people lost their jobs and could barely survive. (Nevaeh wasn’t really sure why—was it something about the

stock market crashing and maybe banks failing, too? And something about there not being enough food, either?) Anyhow, people who were out of work would travel all over the country by hiding out in boxcars, hoping to find jobs and food somewhere else. They couldn't afford to pay for tickets to the passenger sections of trains, so they would try to jump on and off when the train was away from the station and maybe slowed down a little to go around a curve.

It didn't really seem like something anyone would do unless they were desperate.

And trying to jump on or off a moving train must have killed this boy.

"Why was he all alone?" Nevaeh asked. The TV shows she'd watched with Dad had been about grown-ups becoming hobos, not little kids. "Did they ever find his family?"

"This article is on an 'unsolved mysteries of Ohio' website, so I don't think so," Colin said. "But there's something about this coming from an old book, so maybe there was actually a solution after that? I didn't have time to look before, but . . ."

He dove for his phone. Nevaeh pulled hers out, too. She searched for "boy's body found Groveview 1930" and all sorts of variations. She even tried "Sheriff Reeser identifies body found Groveview 1930" as a hopeful possibility. For a good fifteen or twenty minutes, both of them sat in silence, each of them tapping away on their phones. Every few minutes, one of them would groan in frustration when their searches failed.

Finally Nevaeh lowered her phone.

"This is useless," she said. "Nothing ever comes up but that same article. Didn't anybody *care*?"

"It was a long time ago," Colin said. "It's not like every newspaper article from back then is available online. So who knows, maybe this Sheriff Reeser looked and looked and looked. . . . He seemed to care."

Nevaeh turned toward the gathering darkness on the other side of the courthouse, away from the lights of the Zucchini Festival.

"We care, Mystery Boy from 1930," she called out into the darkness. "Ree cares. Don't you go haunting that funeral home!"

Her voice was covered by the bursts of music coming from the Zucchini Festival. But she felt foolish, anyway.

"Why would he haunt the funeral home?" Colin asked. "It wasn't their fault he died. It sounds like this Oscar Taggart guy who owned the funeral

home was being nice, trying to make sure the boy's body was, uh . . . you know."

Apparently Colin didn't like saying the word "embalmed" any more than Nevaeh liked thinking about it.

She tapped her phone against her leg.

"Ree needs to know all this," Nevaeh said. "We haven't solved everything, but maybe this would make her feel better?"

"Right—except that she told us to forget we met her," Colin said glumly. "And to never say her name to anyone."

"Oh!" Nevaeh bolted upright. In her surprise over the article Colin had discovered, Nevaeh had almost forgotten what she'd seen at the funeral home when she went back. Quickly she explained about the dad at the funeral home saying the whole family was having dinner together—but Ree was missing.

"So . . . maybe Ree's *not* in that family?" Colin suggested. "Maybe she's a ghost, too? And she's trying to help this other ghost find his family, ninety-some years late?"

Was he serious?

Nevaeh whacked his arm. Then she pointed at herself.

"I don't believe in ghosts, remember?" she said. "We're the Mystery Solvers. You've got to come up with a better explanation than that!"

But her voice quavered. Nevaeh hadn't believed in ghosts in the bright light of day. But everything felt a little spooky now: the Zucchini Festival lights off in the distance, the fiddle music coming from the stage, the idea of a boy dying near a train back in 1930 . . . even just the idea that there was a funeral home nearby. Especially one that might be haunted.

"I think . . . I think we need to go back to the funeral home," Colin said slowly. "There's got to be some way, some excuse we can give. Maybe we can get my mom or your dad to offer to clean out their attic?"

"You really want to involve our parents?" Nevaeh asked in disbelief. She pictured her dad and older brothers, and the confident way they strode into strangers' houses for junk-removal projects. "If Ree's scared of being around *us* for some reason, she'd be terrified of Axel and Dalton. They'd scare away anyone, ghost or not!"

Colin would know she was just joking about Ree maybe being a ghost, wouldn't he?

“And my mom would throw everything away, whether it might be a helpful clue or not,” Colin agreed.

Normally, Nevaeh would have stuck up for Colin’s mom. But a new idea struck her.

“That’s not the only way to get back into the funeral home,” she said. She grinned because everything was clicking into place in her brain. “Let’s stop thinking about ghosts or Ree or junk removal. What do you say we go meet the *other* kids who live at the funeral home?”

9

Ben's Story

Colin and Nevaeh strode up the sidewalk toward the wide front porch of the funeral home.

It was the next day, Sunday afternoon, and Colin was secretly glad that they'd waited for the light of day for their visit. The sunshine around them seemed to be the enemy of all things spooky and creepy.

But as soon as they mounted the stairs toward the front door, the trees around the funeral home blotted out a lot of the light.

And the wooden floor of the porch creaked beneath their feet.

Then they reached the front door, and it was too ornate, its smoked glass hiding everything beyond.

"Doorbell? Or knock?" Nevaeh asked. She'd made him listen to some song from the *Ghostbusters* movies all the way over to the funeral home—so they could laugh at it, she said. But even she sounded nervous now.

Colin couldn't find his voice to answer.

I ain't afraid of no ghosts, Colin told himself, which came straight from the *Ghostbusters* song.

Somehow, that did actually help. Daringly, he reached out and rapped his knuckles against the heavy wood of the front door.

"Your plan is going to work," Colin assured Nevaeh. "It's a really good idea."

At least it was a really good idea if Nevaeh did all the talking.

The door creaked open, and a tall man in a dark suit stood before them. He had a name tag on one lapel: **Harvey Rhodes, Funeral Director**. So was this Ree's stepfather? The man Nevaeh had seen the night before? Colin saw Nevaeh give a little nod of recognition.

“It’s all right for you to come in without knocking,” Mr. Rhodes said in a deep but gentle voice. “Are you here for the Palmer calling hours or the visitation for Sandra Fitzpatrick?”

What’s he talking about? Colin wondered. Does he have us mixed up with somebody else?

Then he realized: Mr. Rhodes thought Colin and Nevaeh were mourners arriving for a funeral, or something like it. He thought they knew someone *dead*.

“Oh! No, we—” Nevaeh began. Even she seemed flustered.

“Let me guess. You’re not used to going to funerals,” Mr. Rhodes said. “Maybe this is even your first time losing someone. I can assure you, it will be a great source of comfort to the family that you made the effort to come and remember their loved one.”

Mr. Rhodes sounded so kind and sympathetic, Colin would have felt okay burying his face in the man’s lapel and sobbing, if he really had been there for a funeral. And Colin didn’t even know Mr. Rhodes.

How does somebody do that? Colin wondered.

It wasn’t just because of Mr. Rhodes’s voice. His face radiated care and concern, too. Colin could imagine that if he really had been grieving someone, he would want to hang out with this man. *A lot*.

Nevaeh squeezed Colin’s arm, and it felt like she was asking, *What were we thinking? Why didn’t we check to make sure there weren’t any purple-flag cars around before we knocked?*

But Nevaeh was also clearing her throat, regaining her composure.

“Oh, sorry,” she said. “We aren’t here for any calling hours or, uh, visitation. We’re here from the school district. We heard some new kids just moved in, and we’re part of a club that comes out and, well, it’s like we’re the welcoming committee.” She held up a folder she’d assembled with information printed out from the school website the night before. Nevaeh was nothing if not thorough. The folder even had a “Groveview Schools” insignia on it, and Colin had had to look really, really closely to notice that it was also labeled with a school year from fifteen years ago—when Nevaeh’s oldest brother would have been in kindergarten. Those Greeveys saved *everything*.

Nevaeh waved the folder in the air and positively beamed as she finished up, “So are your kids home now? We’d like to give this to them

directly and answer any questions they might have about starting school next month.”

“I’m afraid this isn’t a good time,” Mr. Rhodes said. His warm, gentle voice had just the slightest edge to it now. “Maybe you can come back later, when we’re not so busy. Or just leave that folder and—”

“No, wait, Dad.”

Colin had been so intent on watching Mr. Rhodes, he hadn’t even noticed a boy walking toward them. The boy looked like a teenage version of Mr. Rhodes: same tall, thin frame; similar scholarly glasses; same dark hair and light brown skin. And, like his father, the boy was wearing a dark suit, complete with a black tie. But unlike his father, the boy looked like he’d rather be wearing anything else, like he’d rather *be* anywhere else.

The boy stepped close enough to Mr. Rhodes that he was practically whispering in his father’s ear, “I just had an old white lady pinch my cheeks. I think I deserve a break now. I’ll take these kids upstairs, we’ll talk, I’ll be back in fifteen minutes.”

As Colin watched, Mr. Rhodes and his son peered at one another for a moment. Colin had had no problem overhearing the boy’s whispers, but now he felt completely shut out, as if the man and the boy were having a whole conversation telepathically. Colin had witnessed moments like this before between other fathers and sons—it had happened in Little League when the other boys on his team had their dads comfort them after strikeouts, and it just wasn’t the same having a mom do that. Another time, it was when a neighbor kid was learning how to ride a bike, and the dad ran behind him shouting, “Don’t worry about not having training wheels! *I’m* your training wheels!” And then there was the time Colin had been playing Trouble at a friend’s house, and he suddenly realized that the friend’s dad was letting his son cheat.

A single word always whispered itself in Colin’s head at moments like that, and it whispered itself to him now: *Fatherless. I’m fatherless. This boy has a father, but I don’t.*

“Okay, Ben,” Mr. Rhodes said to his son. All the gentleness had come back into his voice. And he was still peering into his son’s eyes, not looking at Colin and Nevaeh at all. “You take a break and talk to these kids upstairs. But *please* do it quietly. And be back in fifteen minutes.”

“Yes, sir,” Ben said, turning toward the grand stairway.

Colin tried to catch Nevaeh's eye. If Ben and Mr. Rhodes could have a silent conversation, so could Colin and Nevaeh.

Are we really doing this? Colin wanted to ask Nevaeh. *Going upstairs in this creepy house with a kid we don't even know?*

He saw a glint in Nevaeh's eye and knew her reply would be something like *Are you kidding? This is our chance!*

It wasn't really that different from what they'd done meeting with Ree the day before. They'd just talked to her for a little bit at the Zucchini Festival first.

And, anyhow, Colin reasoned, it's not like anything's going to happen when there's, like, two funerals' worth of people wandering around on the first floor of this house. . . .

Maybe he shouldn't think about the fact that all those people were there for funerals. For dead people.

Ben was already halfway up the stairs, and Nevaeh was only a few steps behind him when Colin belatedly stumbled toward the staircase. He rushed to catch up.

"The school district isn't always great about giving our, uh, welcoming committee enough information," Nevaeh was telling Ben. "So we always start out by double-checking. How many kids are there in your family and what grades are you going into?"

The look Ben shot back over his shoulder could have scorched a glacier. He reached the top of the stairs and whirled around.

"Okay, here's the deal," he said. "I don't think you're really from the school district because my dad and stepmom haven't had time to sign us up for *anything* yet. And my dad would remember that if he wasn't so busy thinking about that whole pack of mourners who just came in smelling like they came from a bar, and Mrs. Palmer specifically said she didn't want to see or talk to any of her husband's drinking buddies, and—"

"It sounds like your parents have hard jobs," Nevaeh said. "And the kids in your family help out?"

Colin saw what she was doing. In a minute she'd bring up *Oh, Colin and I help in our family businesses, too*. She'd be able to charm this Ben guy in nothing flat.

"Anyhow, Groveview's a small town," Nevaeh added when Ben didn't reply immediately. "Everybody knows everything about everyone. So

when new people move in . . .” She gave a friendly shrug. “People just notice. And stop by to say hello.”

Nevaeh’s grin was almost blinding in its radiance.

But strangely, Ben frowned back. His face hardened into a glower.

“You mean, people here are nosy,” he said, practically spitting out the words.

“N-not in a bad way,” Nevaeh started to protest, stumbling a little.

“Oh yeah?” Ben challenged. “Maybe if you were the outsider, you’d change your mind.” He clenched his jaw. “Want to know what else that old lady did, after she pinched my cheeks? She *also* kept asking me where I was from. Where I was *really* from. Like what she actually meant was ‘You don’t belong here.’”

Colin and Nevaeh had had “Where did your family move here from?” on their list of questions, too. Colin could almost see Nevaeh deciding not to ask that one.

“And I can’t tell my dad the whole story because he and my stepmom are already struggling to hold all this together.” Ben waved his arm in a way that seemed to indicate the entire funeral home. “So I have fifteen minutes to cool down before I have to go back downstairs and be nice to racist old ladies again.”

“Maybe that old lady was just—” Nevaeh began. Colin shot her a look of horror, and she immediately changed what she was saying. “No—you’re right. I’m sorry. That’s messed up that she wouldn’t let it go. And that she would ask it like that in the first place.”

“Yeah, well,” Ben said grudgingly. “Maybe you can see why I’m not in the mood right now to hear about starting at a new school. Why I want fifteen minutes of just being left alone.”

He lifted a hand, like he was about to point them back toward the stairs. Colin was already barely perched on the top step, and Nevaeh was only a little ahead of him.

“But that was an old person who did that,” Nevaeh started to argue. “The kids in Groveview, none of us are like—”

“Um, Nevaeh, maybe you should ask Daryl or Deepak about that,” Colin whispered. Daryl and Deepak were two of the teenagers who were working for his mom that summer. Daryl was Black and Deepak was Indian American, and they had a whole comedy routine they’d worked up

about dumb things people had said to them. Colin never quite knew if he was supposed to laugh or not.

But now Ben whipped his attention to Colin, as though noticing him for the first time.

“You have a voice?” Ben asked. “You’re not just the silent partner here?”

What was Colin supposed to say to that? He kind of wanted to suggest that Ben should meet Daryl and Deepak, because they *would* know what to tell him about Groveview. And they were nice. But would it sound like Colin was saying that Ben should be friends with Daryl and Deepak just because of the color of their skin? Wasn’t *that* racist?

He also kind of wanted to tell Ben that he could relate to Ben dealing with that obnoxious old lady because people were always asking Colin questions about his dad that he didn’t want to answer. Even the most innocent questions—“What does your dad do?” “Who do you look more like, your mom or your dad?” “Did your dad help you with your batting stance?”—made the horrible word “fatherless” sound in his head again and again, like the tolling of a bell. But maybe it would upset Ben that Colin would compare being fatherless to having someone act like Ben might not belong in Groveview. Because nobody should be prejudiced against Ben, and . . .

And there’s nothing wrong with me not having a father, either, Colin told himself firmly. *There’s nothing wrong with me.*

That was what his mother had told him, the one and only time they’d really talked deeply about it.

Colin realized he’d been thinking for a long time. And Ben was still watching him. Waiting for an answer.

“I usually don’t talk when I don’t know what to say,” Colin blurted out. “Which is most of the time.”

How could he have admitted that?

But Ben’s expression softened even more. Maybe he was more like Mr. Rhodes than Colin had thought, because Ben’s gaze was just as gentle now as his father’s had been.

Ben even patted Colin’s shoulder.

“Let me guess—you’re still in middle school, right?” Ben asked. “*Everybody* feels that way in middle school. Even the kids who pretend not to. Maybe especially the kids who pretend not to.”

Colin couldn't help darting his eyes toward Nevaeh.

Not her, he thought. *She really is as confident as she seems.*

But Colin *did* want to say something to Ben about how sorry he was that not everybody in Groveview had been totally welcoming to Ben and his family. It felt like that mattered more than solving any mysteries. Colin wanted to make up to Ben for the old lady who kept asking questions.

"I don't know what to tell you about nosy people in Groveview," Colin began. "But if one of the things you were worried about moving here was the possibility that this house might be haunted, then Nevaeh and I might be able to help you with that."

And then Colin cringed. Because what if Ben laughed? Or accused them of being stupid little kids who thought ghosts were real?

But Ben just kept studying Colin's face.

"Maybe," he said slowly, "I should introduce you to my sister before I go back downstairs."

10

Melanie's Story

“Your sister?” Nevaeh repeated. “Do you mean—”

But Ben was already walking away from them, down the hall toward the room where they’d met with Ree the day before. Ben held up one finger as if to say, *Just give me a minute. . . .*

As soon as Ben’s back was turned, Nevaeh whisper-squealed to Colin, “You did it! You’re getting us in! He’s going to ‘introduce’ us to Ree, and we’ll make it clear we *didn’t* say her name to anybody, but we’re helping, anyway, and—”

“And she’ll know that I took pictures of her pictures and didn’t delete them after she fired us,” Colin said glumly. “And that we didn’t forget we ever met her, like she told us to.”

Oh, yeah, Nevaeh thought.

“Once we’re face-to-face, I’m sure we can explain,” Nevaeh said. “She’ll be grateful we found out about the boy in the picture and . . .”

Down the hall, Ben wasn’t veering toward Ree’s room. Instead, he yanked open a door on the other side of the hallway. Then he tilted back his head and called out, “Melanie?”

“*Melanie?*” Nevaeh muttered. “How many names does this girl have? Serena, Ree, Harmony . . . now she’s Melanie, too?”

She could hear footsteps, like someone running down a flight of stairs. And then Ben tilted his head down, as if he was talking to someone a lot shorter than him. This time, he was speaking so softly, Nevaeh couldn’t hear what he was saying.

She inched a little closer. Just then Ben stepped back, his hands on a girl’s shoulders, drawing her out past the door.

“This is my sister, Melanie,” he said.

“Melanie the *genius*,” the girl corrected.

It wasn’t Ree. It was the other girl they’d seen wearing a dress at the Zucchini Festival, the same girl Nevaeh had seen having dinner with her family at the picnic table the night before.

Of course, Nevaeh thought. *He said “sister.” Not “stepsister.”*

And, anyhow, Ree hadn’t been there at the “all the family together” dinner the night before, so who knew *what* connection Ree actually had to these two kids?

“Do you also have—?” Nevaeh began.

But Colin was talking, too, introducing himself and Nevaeh.

“*We’re* not geniuses,” he told Melanie. “But we are kind of a welcoming committee from the school. And . . . we’re mystery solvers, too.”

“Yeah, well, last week Melanie would have introduced herself as ‘Melanie the Ballerina,’” Ben said teasingly. “And what was it the week before? ‘Melanie the Future Engineer’?”

Melanie put her hands on her hips.

“When you’re going to be the new girl, you have to figure out what to tell everyone about who you are before anyone else decides what your image is,” Melanie retorted. “And when you’re the new girl who lives in a funeral home . . .”

“Melanie’s the one who’s worried about ghosts,” Ben finished for her.

So when Ree came over to Colin and me on Saturday and said she wanted to hire us to prove the ghost pictures weren’t ghosts . . . was she speaking for herself or Melanie? Nevaeh wondered.

She decided it wasn’t a good time to ask that question yet.

“I’m not *worried* about ghosts,” Melanie spoke up again. It seemed like she spent a lot of time correcting her brother. “I’m just . . . aware of the possibilities.”

“Aware of the possibilities”? Nevaeh thought. *Geez, maybe the kid really is a genius.*

Despite the big words, Melanie didn’t look any older than seven or eight. And despite the defiant hands-on-hips pose, she did actually look worried. That made her seem even younger. So did the fact that she had her dark hair pulled back into a high, little-kid ponytail that was decorated with strange grayish glitter. Or Silly String. No, wait, maybe that was

cobwebs? Melanie also seemed to have cobweb remnants on the cutoff jean shorts and orange tank top she was wearing today instead of a dress.

Nevaeh stepped forward just enough to see through the doorway behind Ben and Melanie. Dark, ancient-looking steps lay just beyond, leading up.

Nevaeh gasped.

“Have you been hanging out in your attic looking for ghosts?” she asked Melanie. “By yourself?”

“While there are funerals going on downstairs?” Colin added.

Melanie and Ben exchanged glances.

“Not funerals, calling hours,” Ben corrected. “Visitations.” He grinned a little evilly and slung his arm around Melanie’s shoulders. “But if you’re asking if she’s doing this while there are actual dead bodies elsewhere in the house—yeah. That’s true. And Melanie has been searching this attic ever since we moved in. Every spare moment she has.”

Nevaeh was a little fuzzy on the difference between calling hours, visitations, and funerals—she thought maybe it was something about whether there was a formal service or whether it was just a time for people to stop by and say how sorry they were to a dead person’s family. But she recognized Ben’s grin and his stance with Melanie. This was how Nevaeh and her siblings acted when other kids said to them, “Your dad’s the Junk King? That’s so *weird*! You must hate having junk around all the time.”

Living in a house with dead bodies was way worse than living in a house with junk.

But *she* wasn’t going to say that to Ben and Melanie.

Not when she was still dying of curiosity—*oops, very curious*—about the double mystery of Ree and the ghostly photos.

“If there are ghosts in this house, I’d rather know for sure than be surprised by them,” Melanie said, setting her jaw stubbornly. “So I want to find out what happened here before we moved in. Don’t you think that’s what would lead to ghosts?”

“We—” Colin began, and Nevaeh could just tell that he was about to describe what he’d found out about the photos Ree had shown them. She dug her elbow into his side.

Not yet, she wanted to tell him. Not until we know how these kids are connected to Ree.

Colin seemed to get the message.

“Want some help?” Nevaeh offered. “The two of us, we’re also experts at cleaning out attics.” She explained about their family businesses.

“I’m not *cleaning*,” Melanie corrected. “I’m just looking.”

“That sounds more fun,” Colin told her.

Melanie glanced at Ben, as if she wanted her brother’s approval. But he was staring at his phone.

“Ugh,” he groaned. “Dad says he needs me downstairs right *now*.”

“You go down, we’ll go up,” Melanie said. And then she said in a too-loud voice, “It’ll be nice to have two other kids helping me in the attic.”

I don’t believe in ghosts, Nevaeh reminded herself.

Because, otherwise, it would have seemed like Melanie was warning a bunch of ghosts in the attic that they were about to have company.

Nevaeh gulped and followed Melanie and Colin up the stairs.

11

The Funeral Home Attic

“Whoa,” Colin whispered, reaching the top of the attic stairs.

He’d lost count of how many attics he’d been in this summer since he’d started helping his mom with her junk-removal business. But this attic—this was the *best*.

First of all, it was huge. If it’d been empty, it would have been a good place to play basketball or maybe even soccer—as long as no one threw or kicked the ball too high. The attic that stretched out before him was at least as large as the playground blacktop at school.

But this attic *wasn’t* empty. It was crammed full of trunks that looked like they might have traveled in covered wagons a couple hundred years ago, and velvet-covered chairs that looked like they’d served as homes to entire generations of mice, and . . .

“Are those coffins?” Nevaeh said with a gulp behind him. She pointed toward a row of shadowy shapes off to the side.

“Sample models from a long time ago,” Melanie said. “Don’t worry. I already looked inside all of them. There are no *human remains*. Just a bunch of papers.”

She turned away quickly, but Colin still caught the flash of a grin on her face.

“You’re teasing us,” Colin said. It was a lot like the way his friends Daryl, Deepak, and Derek had teased him about dead mice the first week Colin had worked with them cleaning out an attic.

But dead human bodies were different from dead mice bodies.

“Would I do that?” Melanie asked, with put-on innocence.

“I’m a younger sister, too,” Nevaeh said. “I’ve got three older brothers and an older sister. I know what it’s like to feel like you *have* to try to

show up the older kids.”

Colin darted a glance toward Nevaeh. She was clearly trying to get Melanie to talk about her own siblings. Maybe even including Ree.

But Melanie only said, “Huh,” and began pointing to different sections of the attic.

“We’ve already looked through every box in the back half of the attic,” she said. “It’s the front half where we’ve been—”

“‘We’?” Colin interrupted. “Was Ben helping you before?”

“Oh, uh, right,” Melanie said. “He was. Some.”

Why did it feel like Melanie was lying now? Like it hadn’t been Ben but someone else she was referring to?

“Things aren’t in order at all,” Melanie said. “There’s stuff from the nineteen-eighties underneath stuff from the nineteen-twenties. It’s like, whenever they brought something new up here, they just shoved all the old stuff into different piles to get it out of the way.”

“People do that a lot in attics,” Colin said.

“Attics are where people put stuff they don’t want to think about anymore,” Nevaeh said. “Out of sight, out of mind. And then, next thing you know, decades pass and, if you’re lucky, somehow you’ve ended up with an attic full of valuable antiques.”

Colin could tell she was quoting her dad. He knew Nevaeh’s private opinion, that old stuff was just junk. Nevaeh was like Colin’s mom: she liked new stuff a lot better than antiques.

Melanie snorted.

“I don’t think anyone’s going to want a hundred years’ worth of magazines for funeral directors,” she said. “*The Casket, Funeral Times* . . .”

“Ha ha, you think we would actually believe there’s a magazine called *The Casket*?” Nevaeh asked.

Melanie silently pointed straight down, to a pile of magazines that came up as high as her waist. Colin reached over and rubbed off a layer of dust to reveal a page with frilly lettering: The Ca . . .

Evidently there was a magazine called *The Casket*. Or there had been, once upon a time.

“Do you mind if I take pictures in here?” Colin asked. It wasn’t just the rising dust that made his throat feel stopped-up. “Sometimes I like taking

pictures of old stuff, and . . . I don't know. I just like to remember exactly how things look."

Nevaeh shot him a glance that seemed to say, *You were able to tell her that without being embarrassed? Good for you!*

For a long time, Colin hadn't wanted to tell anyone how much he liked taking pictures of weird old stuff. For a long time, he hadn't told anyone but Nevaeh.

But it was easier now. Nevaeh hadn't laughed at him. That was what mattered.

Melanie shrugged.

"I don't care," she said.

Colin pulled out his phone and stepped to the side, so he could capture the look of the dust floating above the piled-up magazines, caught in a beam of light from the high-up windows.

"So what's the goal here?" Nevaeh asked, hovering over a stack of equally dusty boxes nearby. "Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"Evidence," Melanie said. "Proof that something bad might have happened here that would lead to any ghosts wanting to haunt this house."

"Have you, um, seen any signs that the house is haunted?" Colin asked. He could barely believe he'd managed to force those words out of his mouth. "I mean, usually people don't go *looking* for ghosts. The ghosts show up, and *then* people try to figure out why they're there."

Melanie fixed him with a hard stare.

"You really want to ask that question standing *there*?" she asked.

Colin realized he'd angled himself in between two old coffins when he'd moved to take the picture. Quickly, he bounded forward.

But he knocked against a stack of old, dusty boxes balanced on one of the old velvet chairs. The stack toppled, and the boxes smashed to the floor, the old cardboard splitting on impact. Ancient, yellowing brochures scattered across the floor.

"Oh, sorry. I can pick those up." Colin fell to his knees and scrambled to stop the avalanche of brochures. He tried to gather them back into a stack, even as they were still falling.

Then it registered what the brochures actually said. One after the other, every single brochure had the same words in thick black ink across the top: "The Bring Back the Dead League."

Beside Colin, Melanie began to scream.

12

Ree Returns

Everything happened at once.

Nevaeh rushed over to Colin and Melanie, but in her haste, she banged her shin on one of the coffins. So she couldn't help but cry out. Then she hopped around on one foot, rubbing her ankle and leg and moaning.

Meanwhile, Colin was saying, "Melanie! Melanie! Aren't we supposed to be quiet because of the funerals downstairs? And *look!* Maybe this isn't what you think . . ."

But Melanie was truly crying now, hollering, "Ree! Ree, help! Please!" And then there was a thud at the back of the attic.

I don't believe in ghosts, Nevaeh thought. *I don't believe in ghosts. I don't believe in ghosts. I don't believe in . . .*

She let go of her throbbing ankle and stood up straighter and taller, so she could peer off toward the back of the attic.

Someone—or something? *No, someone*—was rising up from the shadows under the eaves. The light coming in from the dormer windows was at the wrong angle, so the figure was mostly just a shape. A . . . human shape.

"Everyone, calm down!" the shape cried.

It was Ree's voice.

Or Serena's? Or Harmony's? Nevaeh wondered.

Nevaeh decided to go with the name the girl had said to use. Or, at least, what the girl had said before she told Nevaeh and Colin to forget her.

"Ree?" Nevaeh called. "You've been in this attic all along, and you didn't even tell us you were here?"

Ree didn't answer. She didn't even look at Nevaeh. She just rushed toward Melanie, gracefully speeding past all the boxes and chairs and

trunks and other towering stacks—and she did it without looking down or around.

It seemed like she had lots of practice traveling that route.

“Melanie, I’m serious,” Ree called. “You do not want to be so loud that any of the grown-ups come up here to find out what’s going on.”

Melanie stopped screaming. Ree reached Melanie’s side and scooped her up into her arms.

That’s what Prilla would do with me when I was little and got upset, Nevaeh thought.

Ree and Melanie were definitely sisters. Even if there was the word “step” in front of the title, it didn’t matter.

Melanie was sniffing now, not so much “Melanie the Genius” or whatever other identities she’d been trying on, but more “Melanie the Forlorn Little Girl.”

“I gave it away, that you were here,” Melanie moaned to Ree. “You said it was too risky for you to be seen by anyone again, and now I made you come out in front of these kids. . . .”

“Never mind that,” Ree said, smoothing down the younger girl’s hair. She gave Nevaeh and Colin a fierce look. “I was the one who made the mistake of having them come to our house yesterday.”

“You can trust us,” Nevaeh blurted out. “We tried to tell you that. We just . . . don’t understand what’s going on.”

Ree seemed to ignore that, too. She kept hugging Melanie close.

“Now, what got you so upset?” Ree murmured into the other girl’s hair.

Silently, Melanie pointed at the brochures spread across the floor.

“I—I don’t think it’s as bad as it sounds,” Colin said. He’d kept his head bent over the brochures. “It’s not actually about bringing back ghosts or ghouls or . . . I don’t know . . . zombies.”

For the first time, Nevaeh looked closely at the brochures spread out across the floor. The words “The Bring Back the Dead League” repeated again and again and again. She felt a little dizzy.

“Um, could you explain faster?” she asked Colin.

Colin lifted one of the brochures.

“These are from 1919,” he said. “It looks like the Bring Back the Dead League was a group that wanted to bring back the bodies of the American soldiers who died in Europe during some war. *Just* the bodies. Not ghosts. This league wasn’t asking to be haunted.”

“Was it after World War I?” Nevaeh suggested. “I mean, that would be the right timing. But they wouldn’t have called it World War I in the brochures because they didn’t know there was going to be a World War II. In 1919 they thought they’d just had ‘the war to end all wars.’”

Her dad had made her watch history specials on TV about that, too.

“Okay, if you say so,” Colin said, still scanning the brochure. “Anyhow, it sounds like the generals and other officials—like Teddy Roosevelt?—they thought it was fine to leave all the American soldiers buried on the battlefields where they died. But a lot of the soldiers’ families formed this Bring Back the Dead League so the soldiers could be brought home and buried on American soil, where their families could visit their graves and, I guess, grieve properly. That’s what they called it.”

“So see, Melanie? It’s nothing to worry about,” Ree said, her voice peeling out artificially bright and cheery. “Just people trying to do something *good*. Taking care of the people they love, even after they died.”

It all sounded pretty grisly to Nevaeh, either way. Anything with dead bodies was awful.

But she wasn’t going to point that out.

“Did the brochures work?” Melanie asked. “Did those people get what they wanted?”

“Um . . .” Colin shrugged. “I can’t actually tell from this brochure. We’d have to look it up online. Or at the library. We can do that later. But, Ree, about the pictures you wanted to know about yesterday—”

Ree darted her gaze down toward Melanie and shook her head.

Oh, right, Nevaeh thought. Probably not a good idea to keep talking about corpses in front of a little kid who’s worried about ghosts.

Nevaeh wasn’t thrilled about talking about dead people, either. She backed away from the brochures. And then she backed up a little more. Ree was still hunched over Melanie, still whispering comforting words. Colin was still peering down at the brochure in his hand. Nevaeh began retracing the route she’d seen Ree follow through the back half of the attic. Something was nagging at her. Why had Ree been way back there, when Melanie had said they’d already searched that half of the attic?

Nevaeh reached the back wall of the attic, the spot where Ree had suddenly popped out. And there at Nevaeh’s feet, she saw a rumpled sleeping bag and a pillow, almost like a nest on the floor. On one side of the sleeping bag, there was a stack of modern-looking books and a laptop

and a phone charger. On the other side, a little tower of improvised shelves made out of bricks and two-by-fours held a plastic-wrapped loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter, a box of granola bars, a bag of apples, and a jug of water.

“Ree, have you been *you living* up here?” Nevaeh gasped. She whirled back toward the other girl. “Is your family like, I don’t know, Cinderella’s, and they’re forcing you to sleep in the attic? And you’re not even allowed to eat meals with them? Because you’re the stepsister? But, no, it looks like you and Melanie get along, so . . .”

Ree scrambled to her feet and raced toward Nevaeh.

“Get away from my stuff!” she snarled.

Nevaeh raised her hands in an “I’m innocent!” gesture.

“I’m not touching anything,” she called back. “I just don’t understand. Ree, are you being . . . mistreated or something?”

Truly sad possibilities were starting to form in her head. Ree began violently shaking her head, even as she ran.

“Oh no,” Ree said. “No, no, no—don’t think that. I’m just . . .” She reached Nevaeh’s side and seemed to realize she couldn’t make Nevaeh unsee all the evidence before her. Ree’s shoulders slumped. “I’m not supposed to be here,” she whispered.

“Here in this attic, you mean?” Nevaeh asked.

“Not just that,” Ree admitted. “Not here in this house. Or here in this town.”

“What are you talking about?” Nevaeh asked. “You told us your mom got married and bought this funeral home with her new husband. Isn’t any of that true?”

It didn’t seem possible, but Ree’s shoulders slumped even more.

“All of that’s true,” Ree protested weakly. “But . . . I’m supposed to be with my dad’s parents this summer. And they think Mom sent me to camp instead.” Her eyes seemed to burn into Nevaeh’s. “Ben and Melanie are the only ones who know I’m here. Ben and Melanie . . . and now the two of you.”

13

Ree's Story . . . Again

“And your grandmother,” Colin said.

He hadn't exactly been quiet, running across the attic toward Nevaeh and Ree, right behind Melanie. But the three girls all whipped around to look at him, as if they'd practically forgotten he was there. Even Nevaeh, who always seemed so on top of things, looked confused.

“Your grandmother knows you're here,” Colin repeated to Ree. “We saw you talking to her just yesterday.”

“My grandmother . . . has dementia,” Ree said, as if this was a hard thing to admit. “She's not really connected to reality anymore. Most of the time she thinks I'm my mom when my mom was my age.”

“Oh,” Colin said. “I'm sorry.”

“Is *that* why she called you ‘Harmony’ yesterday?” Nevaeh asked. “Is your mom's name Harmony?”

Ree nodded. Her eyes glistened with tears.

“She doesn't *always* forget me,” Ree said. “But if I waited the whole summer before I saw her again . . . what if I missed the last time she'd ever recognize me?”

Colin tried to imagine what that would be like. He didn't have any grandparents he was close to, but what if his own mother stopped recognizing him someday?

She's a lot younger than Ree's grandmother, he reminded himself. Nothing's going to happen to Mom until I'm really old, too.

He still kind of thought he'd hug her extra hard when he saw her tonight.

“So that's why you're hiding here,” Nevaeh whispered. “You don't want to miss any time with your grandma while she still knows who you

are. But . . . wouldn't your mom and stepdad want you to have that? Don't they understand?"

Ree's eyes turned stony.

"They *should*," she said. "But Mom says . . . she says it's too 'upsetting' for me to be around Grandma Hal, and for Grandma Hal to be around me. She says I get Grandma Hal all riled up—agitated, it's called, with people who have her disease. And . . . Mom thinks it makes me cry too much, and it's better if I'm 'distracted' by not being around so much while Grandma Hal is . . . slipping away."

"Mothers," Colin huffed.

A surge of anger swelled inside him, taking him by surprise. Colin had just met Ree and her grandmother the day before. And he'd never met Ree's mother. But he was *furious* that Ree's mom was being so overprotective, keeping Ree away from the grandmother she loved, just because it made people upset. It was probably just that Ree's *mom* couldn't handle seeing Ree and her grandmother being unhappy. Kids deserved to be with their families. Even if . . .

Oh, Colin realized. It's not really Ree's mom that I'm mad at. I'm just mad at my own mom for being like Ree's. For not telling me enough about my dad. And keeping us apart.

It was so weird how he'd been vowing a moment ago to give his mom an extra hug, and now he wanted to go home and yell at her.

"You're not telling them the whole story," Melanie complained, going over to stand by Ree's side. She leaned against Ree's waist, and after a second, Ree wrapped an arm around Melanie's shoulders. They looked united—but just barely.

"I just told Nevaeh and Colin that I'm hiding out in the attic of my own house like some homeless person and lying to everyone in my family but you and Ben—and Grandma Hal," Ree grumbled. "If I tell them anything else, they'll think I've totally gone off the deep end."

"But you have to tell the rest for it to make any sense," Melanie insisted.

Ree rolled her eyes and lifted her hands in a gesture of helplessness. Then she let them fall.

"Go ahead," she muttered.

Melanie stood up straight again, her dark eyes wide and serious.

“It’s because of the ghost,” Melanie said. “When Ree’s around, that’s the only time Grandma Hal sees the ghost.”

14

Nevaeh's Story

"I knew *somebody* had to have seen a ghost in this house," Colin said, practically crowing. He acted like Melanie's announcement was a good thing. "What did it look like? Like the pictures you showed us? Did anyone else besides your grandma see it?"

Dimly, Nevaeh heard Ree and Melanie start to answer—"Only Grandma Hal . . ." "She won't describe it except to say that it looks like the pictures. . . ." "It was Grandma Hal who found the pictures in the attic in the first place. . . ." But the words came to Nevaeh as if the other three kids were far, far away.

And why do I feel so dizzy? Nevaeh wondered.

The dust still hovering in the air around them seemed too thick. The attic felt too hot and too close and still.

"I have to go," Nevaeh said abruptly.

The other three kids could not have looked more surprised if she'd announced that she was seeing a ghost at that very moment.

"Now?" Colin asked.

"Um, yeah," Nevaeh said. She pulled her phone from the back pocket of her shorts. "Just got a text."

She didn't even try to explain how she could have known what the text said before she saw it.

"But can't you tell whoever it is to . . . wait?" Colin asked, squinting at her in confusion.

"No, Colin, I can't," Nevaeh said. And somehow, though she didn't mean to, she sounded indignant. "I'm not like you, able to ride my bike wherever I want to go. We live so far out of town, I can only go places

when my parents or sister or brothers are available to drive me. So I need to leave now!”

“Okay,” Colin said, holding his hands out as if she needed to be placated. “But do you mind if I . . . stay?”

Nevaeh couldn’t tell if he was asking her or Ree and Melanie. It hadn’t occurred to her that she’d be forcing Colin to make a choice. If she left, wouldn’t he automatically decide to leave, too?

“You can stay!” Melanie told Colin. “It’s nice having someone besides Ben and Ree that I don’t have to keep secrets from!”

“I’ll fill you in later, Nevaeh,” Colin said.

But Nevaeh had already turned away. She didn’t bother answering, just stalked toward the stairs.

What are you so upset about? You’re the one who’s abandoning Colin, a little voice whispered in her head. You’re the one who’s not making sense.

She kept going, anyhow. She climbed down the stairs and opened the door to go back out into the hallway on the second floor of the funeral home. There was air-conditioning here. Maybe that was all Nevaeh needed. Maybe it was just the heat in the attic that had made Nevaeh feel so weak-kneed and dizzy and weird.

Nevaeh shut the attic door behind her and stood still for a moment, feeling more and more like her normal self.

And more and more foolish.

What just happened up there? she wondered. *I’m not a coward. I’m not afraid of dusty old attics. I’ve seen all sorts of gross and disgusting and scary things in attics and basements all summer long, and it never bothered me.*

Anyhow, it hadn’t bothered her any more than her usual feeling of hating junk.

It was nice that this hallway held no junk or even any antiques. The cool, clean air flowed around her. *Modern* air. Not old, cooped-up air like in the attic. Not ghostly air. Not haunted air.

Nevaeh breathed in deeply. Then out. She leaned her forehead against the wall, letting herself regain her strength.

I’ll go back up in a minute, she told herself. I’ll laugh it off. I’ll say . . . I’ll say I misread the text. Or that Prilla or Mom or Dad or whichever brother was supposed to drive me decided to run another errand before

picking me up. I'll tell Colin the truth later. After we've solved all the mysteries here.

Really, what mystery was there even left to solve? Ree was hiding from her family because her parents didn't want her there upsetting her grandmother. The only person who'd ever seen a ghost in the funeral home was an old lady who had dementia, who also got mixed up about who her own granddaughter was.

There isn't a ghost, Nevaeh told herself firmly. I've been right all along, not to believe in ghosts. I just have to tell the others.

Just then, someone touched her shoulder.

Nevaeh whirled around so fast, she could have set an Olympic record for reflex reactions.

An old lady stood before her: Ree's grandmother. But she just looked like a normal elderly woman today. Her gray eyes were clear and bright and lively. Her silvery hair was neatly combed. Her red sweater was tidily buttoned over a cream-colored dress. She stood straight, without a walker or a cane.

Then she began to talk.

"Did you see him?" Ree's grandmother asked. "Did you see the boy, too?"

Colin in the Attic without Nevaeh

“Is your friend okay?” Ree asked Colin.

“Nevaeh?” Colin asked. As if he had any other friends. “She’s fine. She just has this really big family, and she does have to rely on them to drive her around, and so she has to keep track of her sister’s schedule acting in plays, and her one brother being in science fairs, and her other brothers doing sports, and then her parents both have really weird work schedules, and her mom works nights and sleeps during the day, and . . .”

And even though all that was true, it felt like he was lying for Nevaeh. Because surely Ree and Melanie could have seen, just as much as he did, that Nevaeh hadn’t even looked at her phone before announcing that she had to go. Her phone hadn’t dinged with a text coming in, and he knew for a fact that she didn’t have her phone on silent. Nevaeh wasn’t the silent type.

But Nevaeh had to be okay, because she always *was* okay. She was the one who knew how to talk to people. She was the one who knew what to do in every circumstance.

“Um . . .,” Colin said.

Ree sat back on her haunches.

“Some people just get creeped out by funeral homes, period,” she said. “And then we’re sitting here talking about ghosts . . . it is a lot.”

Melanie giggled.

“Remember the funeral for that motorcycle gang guy?” she asked Ree. “All those big, tough-looking guys with face tattoos and black leather jackets?”

“And women who had even more tattoos than the men,” Ree added.

“And didn’t my dad and your mom say that was their all-time record for the number of people who fainted during a funeral?” Melanie asked.

“The bigger they are, the harder they fall,” Ree said, rolling her eyes. “And it turned out the guy who was kind of the leader of the motorcycle gang, the toughest-looking guy of all, he couldn’t even force himself to come inside the funeral home. Couldn’t make himself get off his motorcycle. So Grandma Hal sat on the motorcycle beside him, holding his hand and telling him what would be happening every second inside the funeral, how his dead friend was being taken care of and honored. And she kept handing him Kleenex and wiping away his tears while he cried.”

Colin tried to imagine the frail, lost woman he’d seen the day before sitting on a motorcycle. With or without a big tough guy with face tattoos and Kleenex and tears.

That had to have happened a long time ago.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “How long have your parents been together? I thought they just got married. I thought you just moved here.”

“They did! We did!” Melanie assured him.

“But our parents dated *forever*,” Ree said. “Ben and Melanie and me, we’ve pretty much grown up together, even before our parents got married. I bet Melanie doesn’t even remember a time when she didn’t know me.”

She pulled Melanie closer, in some exaggerated show of sisterly love. Melanie promptly shoved her away.

“I remember things from before I was *five*,” she protested.

It reminded Colin of how Nevaeh acted around her brothers and sister. The Greeveys were always poking fun at each other or complaining about each other—or defending each other if anyone else said anything bad about them.

And Ree and Melanie had told the story of the motorcycle guy’s funeral the same way Nevaeh and her siblings told stories: taking turns finishing each other’s sentences, egging each other on.

This made Colin feel a little lonely. What was he doing sitting here with these two girls he didn’t even know? They were fine without him. Why *hadn’t* he left with Nevaeh?

Because she doesn’t really care about the ghost photos, he thought. *And I do.*

And Ree wasn’t fine. Her grandmother was slipping away and scared of some ghost. Or . . . a maybe-ghost that Ree wanted to prove wasn’t real.

And Ree was keeping secrets and hiding from her parents because of her grandmother.

Colin began edging his phone out of his pocket.

“Nevaeh and I didn’t really come here because we wanted to tell you about school,” he admitted.

“We *knew* that,” Melanie said scornfully. “Who wants to think about school before they have to? In *July*?”

“We didn’t know what other excuse we could use to get back in here,” Colin said. “And I kind of have to confess . . .”

He explained about how he’d taken pictures of the ghost photos when he still thought Ree was going to hire them. He explained about how Nevaeh had told him to delete them, but he’d decided to do a reverse-image search first.

“I didn’t think it would hurt anything,” Colin said, still apologizing.

Ree’s face lit up.

“Are you saying you *found* something?”

Colin’s fingers flew over the phone, repeating his search. Then he held out his phone with the newspaper article from 1930 glowing from its screen.

“It’s a sad story,” he said, his voice cracking as though still apologizing. “A boy died falling or jumping off a train, and nobody knew who he was or where he’d come from or how to reach his family, who had to have been trying to find him. . . .”

Ree took the phone from him and huddled with Melanie, reading. Ree murmured to the younger girl, “That long word is ‘suspicious,’ if you’re still trying to figure that one out” and “Do you know what dungarees are? I think it’s just a really old-fashioned word for blue jeans.”

Colin waited in silence.

“So, I don’t know if it’s possible to be logical about ghosts and hauntings,” Colin said, when he thought they’d both finished. “But my theory—or, really, the theory Nevaeh and I came up with together—is that there’s no reason this boy would want to haunt anyone at this funeral home. Because it sounds like the people who owned the funeral home were trying to help. And so was the sheriff.”

Ree slid the phone back into Colin’s hand. Her eyes were troubled, and she furrowed her brow. She glanced down at Melanie and gave a little shake of her head.

But it was Melanie who spoke next.

“Unless the sheriff and the funeral home owners were just trying to make themselves sound good for the newspaper,” she said. “Unless they lied and didn’t actually do anything to help at all.”

She gazed up at Colin and Ree, like she was proud of what she’d figured out. Then she gasped, as if an even worse thought had just occurred to her.

“And unless . . . what if the boy’s body is still here?”

Nevaeh and Grandma Hal

“Did I see . . . a boy?” Nevaeh repeated numbly, staring down at Ree’s grandmother. “What boy? Do you mean . . .”

She couldn’t say it. She refused to finish the question *Do you mean the ghost?*

Ree’s grandmother blinked.

“You know,” she said. “I can tell you saw him. You were just there.”

She waved her hand vaguely. She could have been pointing at the attic door or anything else in the hallway, all the way over to the grand staircase at the front of the house.

“Oh!” Nevaeh exclaimed, relief flooding over her. “You mean Ben! Your grandson! Or . . . step-grandson, I guess. Your *new* step-grandson. I was standing over there talking to him a little bit ago. But then Ben went back downstairs. To help his dad.”

The old lady wrinkled up her face in confusion.

“Who’s Ben?” she asked.

Her eyes glistened. Was she about to cry?

“Never mind,” Nevaeh said quickly. She remembered the sorrowful look on Ree’s face when Ree had said, “My grandmother . . . has dementia.” She remembered hearing the way Ree had talked to her grandmother the day before, when she’d had to remind the old woman of Ree’s own name. And it had seemed like Ree had always been really close to her grandmother her entire life.

If the old woman couldn’t always remember who Ree was, it wasn’t surprising that she’d also forget a step-grandson who’d only recently become part of the family.

Ree's grandmother shifted slightly on her feet, as if she wasn't entirely sure even how to stand anymore. Her dress rustled. No, Nevaeh realized, looking closer, it wasn't actually a dress beneath the cheery red sweater. It was either a nightgown or a slip, one of those old-fashioned pieces of clothing women used to wear under their dresses back in the twentieth century. So Ree's grandmother was basically wandering around in her underwear.

"Can I help you?" Nevaeh asked. "Maybe take you back to your room? Or get someone from your family to help you?"

She never wanted to step foot in the attic again, but if she needed to, she could open the attic door and holler, "Ree? Melanie? Your grandmother needs you!" really fast.

Ree's grandmother jerked to attention, her entire demeanor changing again.

"*Help* me?" she asked, her voice as mocking as if Nevaeh had proposed flying out the nearest window. Or . . . going ghost hunting. "*Help me?* That's not how it works. I take care of people. No one has to take care of me."

"Oh, um . . .," Nevaeh said.

The old lady patted Nevaeh's arm, like Nevaeh was the one in distress.

"You'll be okay," Ree's grandmother said, her voice cheery now. "After my husband died and left me with a twelve-year-old daughter and no money, I had to start working at the funeral home just to pay off the cost of his funeral. Turned out, I was *good* at it. All the men said there'd never be a female funeral director because, you know, we'd be too hysterical about it. And faced with a corpse we needed to embalm, what would we do but cry and scream? It's like those men didn't even remember whose shoulder they cried on when they had to. They didn't remember who cleaned up after them all the time. They didn't remember if we ladies can handle giving birth, we can surely handle ushering a body into the ground. It's a lot harder to keep a newborn alive than to get a corpse to stay dead."

Uhhh . . . that last part's a joke, right? Nevaeh wanted to ask.

Ree's grandmother was grinning triumphantly now. It was as if Nevaeh had asked the old woman to start giving a speech. Maybe it was a speech she truly had given sometime in the past. The words came out well-worn, practically automatic.

“It . . . it must have been hard working as a funeral director, back when people thought only men could do that,” Nevaeh stammered.

“Hard?” Ree’s grandmother repeated. “The hardest part is not getting the heebie-jeebies about death. But my best friend growing up was the daughter of a funeral director. Her house was the town’s funeral home. I was at her house as much as my own. I felt comfortable there. Playing hide-and-seek in the coffin room. Jumping out to scare *other* kids. Taking dares to try on the makeup that was, you know, there to be used on corpses.”

Nevaeh couldn’t hide a shiver. The old lady’s expression changed again, her eyes going round with sympathy.

“Oh, dear, here I am prattling on,” she said. “And you so deeply in grief . . .” She patted Nevaeh’s arm. “No loss is easy. It’s perfectly natural to mourn how things used to be, the loved ones you took for granted would always be there for you, the way any loss changes you . . .”

Nevaeh jolted. Could Ree’s grandmother somehow know how Nevaeh had felt last night walking around alone at the Zucchini Festival, when it was clear that Prilla didn’t want her around? Or for that matter, how Nevaeh had felt yesterday afternoon, half thinking everything about the Zucchini Festival was childish and stupid; half wishing she was still a little kid who only cared about riding the merry-go-round.

Or how Nevaeh had felt in the attic only moments ago when Colin didn’t automatically follow her out.

“I—I . . .,” Nevaeh choked out.

Ree’s grandmother kept patting her arm. It was so soothing. The old lady’s eyes were so kind and sympathetic. It reminded Nevaeh of how Ben and Melanie’s dad had looked, even though physically they were so dissimilar: Ree’s grandmother was frail and ancient and shrunken and much too pale, not to mention dressed in mismatched clothes. Mr. Rhodes had looked to be in the prime of life, his posture perfect in his precisely fitted dark suit.

This is what funeral directors do, Nevaeh thought.

Maybe Ree’s grandmother had spent so much of her life comforting mourners, she still thought she needed to do that. Apparently she could still summon that part of herself back, on autopilot, even when she couldn’t remember her own family members’ names.

Ree’s grandmother swayed unsteadily.

“Maybe you should go sit down?” Nevaeh suggested. “Or lie down?”

“You say you would like to sit down?” Ree’s grandmother asked, a bit too loudly. Either she hadn’t heard Nevaeh very well, or she was so caught up in the illusion that Nevaeh was a mourner who needed comfort, that she was just speaking her lines. “Of course, dear, I was about to suggest that. Come sit down, and I’ll bring you a glass of water.”

She took Nevaeh’s arm and drew her down the hall, veering toward her own doorway. Nevaeh could have pulled away, but Ree’s grandmother was walking so unsteadily now, Nevaeh was afraid that would make her fall.

Just get her into her room, and then . . .

Nevaeh had no clue how to escape.

But as soon as they crossed the threshold into the old lady’s room, Ree’s grandmother let out a happy sigh. “Oh, my bed!”

She dropped Nevaeh’s arm and practically raced over to the bed. She crawled in and murmured, “Good night . . .”

“Uh, it’s only . . . three o’clock in the afternoon?” Nevaeh said, peering over at all the sunlight streaming in the window. Nevaeh almost felt like she herself needed reassurance that she had a firm grip on reality.

Ree’s grandmother didn’t answer. Her eyes closed.

Nevaeh stepped over to the bed to pull the covers up to the old lady’s shoulders. This was harder than it should have been, because the old lady had odd items lying in the bed with her: a pile of ancient-looking photo albums, a wooden jewelry box, a spoon, an empty water bottle. Stepping back, Nevaeh barely missed knocking over the ornate lamp on the nightstand. It was a lucky miss—even shifting the lamp an inch or two would have knocked over at least half a dozen picture frames clustered around the lamp’s base.

This room needs Colin’s mom to come in and clear away all the clutter, Nevaeh thought. Framed pictures also crowded the top of the dresser and a nearby blanket chest. Most of them, as far as Nevaeh could tell, seemed to be of Ree at various ages, with or without her mom or grandma. Or, no—Nevaeh looked more closely at the cluster of nightstand photos—based on what people were wearing and how faded some of the pictures were, about half of the pictures had to have been of Ree’s mother.

No wonder the old lady gets her daughter and granddaughter confused, Nevaeh thought. Ree’s mom at twelve or so really had looked a lot like Ree now, even down to the long, straight brown hair.

One of the photos on the nightstand was in black-and-white, and so grainy and ancient that Nevaeh thought it had to be from Ree's *grandmother's* childhood. Nevaeh picked this one up to examine it more closely, to see if all three generations had an equally strong resemblance.

And then Nevaeh almost dropped the photo.

This photo showed two little girls, one dark-haired, one blond. They had their arms around each other's shoulders, and they seemed to be grinning ear to ear. But that was really all Nevaeh could tell about their faces, because the picture was taken from such a great distance. It was almost as if the photographer had cared more about showing the house behind them than the girls themselves. The house was impressive: large and gabled and familiar somehow, with a sign out front in an elegant script. Nevaeh could just make out the first part of the first word: Tag . . .

Nevaeh had seen that sign before, too. She whirled back toward the old lady in the bed.

"Mrs.—er, Grandma Hal?" she demanded. "Did you grow up here in Groveview? And the funeral home where you played with your best friend . . . was it *this very house*?"

Colin, Not Calm

Don't freak out, Colin told himself.

After all, neither Melanie nor Ree were jumping up and fleeing the attic at the thought of the dead boy's body from 1930 still being somewhere in the house. And Melanie was a little kid. If she could be so calm and brave, Colin had to avoid embarrassing himself and panicking.

But he couldn't help blurting out, "How can you even think that? If I found out there'd been a dead body hidden in my house for the past ninety-some years, I'd, I'd—"

Melanie and Ree both started laughing.

"Colin, there are dead bodies in this house pretty much every single night," Ree said, almost teasingly. "There are two dead bodies in open caskets down on the first floor *right now*. With all sorts of people staring at them. And—how many more, Melanie?—down in the basement ready for funerals tomorrow?"

"Just one, I think," Melanie said. "Dad told us at breakfast, but I really wasn't listening."

"So three dead bodies," Ree finished. "Three dead bodies *that we know about*. Just a normal day, living in a funeral home. Ho hum."

She lifted her eyebrows and pursed her lips as if pretending to whistle. She tilted her head side to side, a mocking vision of being carefree.

Colin watched in silence for a moment.

"You're not really as calm as you look," he said. "You're just pretending to be calm."

"Maybe?" Ree acknowledged doubtfully.

"Tell him what Grandma Hal says," Melanie suggested.

Ree took a deep breath.

“Grandma Hal says—er, she *said*, before she got dementia—that you’re a ninny if you get hysterical all the time about dead bodies,” she explained. “But if you don’t feel a little odd about them, if you don’t want to do everything you can to treat them with respect . . . then you’ve lost your humanity.”

“That’s why there are, like, a million laws about how someone can treat a dead body,” Melanie said. “That’s why there are lawsuits about skeletons in museums. About returning them to their families or tribes.”

“There are?” Colin said.

Melanie glared at him.

“Maybe I’ll . . . look it up myself,” Colin said weakly. “Later.”

Ree pointed at the dark screen of Colin’s phone. The article about the dead boy from 1930 had faded away while they were talking.

“I don’t know what the laws were in 1930,” she said. “But what Melanie’s talking about, about how that boy’s body might still be here . . . it’s because of how things used to be in the early days of modern funeral homes and modern embalming. You know what embalming is—using chemicals to preserve a dead body, to keep it from decomposing?”

“I . . . guess so,” Colin muttered.

“Okay, so back when scientific embalming techniques were kind of a new idea, sometimes funeral homes would get the body of, like, a horse thief or what they called a ‘vagrant,’” Ree said. “A body that, well, nobody wanted. Or nobody could afford to claim. And the funeral home, they’d embalm that body just to show what they could do. Then they might keep the body on display for years. Even decades.”

Colin winced.

“Isn’t that—” he began.

“Disrespectful of *their* humanity?” Melanie said, sounding a lot older than seven or eight. “Yes.”

She glared fiercely again, but Colin didn’t feel like it was aimed at him this time.

“So if that’s what happened to that boy from 1930, you think he’d have a reason to haunt this funeral home,” Colin finished for her.

He felt a little ridiculous saying that with a straight face. He wished Nevaeh was still there to make some joke, to lighten the mood. To cheer everybody up.

Without Nevaeh, they all stayed serious. Almost frozen.

Then Ree tapped her chin thoughtfully.

“But, Melanie, I’m not sure that kind of thing was still going on in 1930,” she said. “And even if the Taggarts used this boy’s body as a, uh, ‘display model,’ they wouldn’t have just forgotten it was here.” She patted Melanie’s shoulder, then gestured toward Colin’s phone again. “If there’s a newspaper article about this boy’s body being found, wouldn’t there be more articles about what happened next? About the body being displayed or claimed?”

“We can find out,” Colin assured her, relief washing over him. Even without Nevaeh, they’d found their way back to safer ground. He’d much rather search for newspaper articles than dead bodies. “I’ll talk to Nevaeh. We tried looking up everything we could online already, but maybe there’s more stuff we can find at the library. It’s closed today, so we’ll have to wait until tomorrow. But maybe you two can meet us there. Maybe your brother can come, too.”

He saw it in his mind: Nevaeh and Colin and the three Lane-Rhodes kids clustered around a table at the library, laughing and talking about whatever they found. They’d be the group of kids other kids looked at and thought, *They look like they’re having so much fun! I wish those were my friends.*

It wouldn’t even matter that they would be talking about a dead body from 1930. It wouldn’t matter that they’d be talking about a maybe-ghost. They’d be in it together. Solving a *mystery* together.

Because surely there was a solution.

But Melanie and Ree were both shaking their heads.

“I can’t meet you at the library,” Ree said. “I’m hiding, remember?”

Colin noticed that Melanie didn’t volunteer to talk Ben into going to the library without Ree.

“You went to the Zucchini Festival yesterday,” Colin reminded Ree.

“Only because I knew I could time it around Mom and Harvey being away,” Ree said. “And then, really, that was too dangerous. You and your friend came back here today, and . . . what if you’d accidentally ruined my whole summer by saying something to my mom or stepdad about having seen me?”

“We knew not to do that,” Colin protested. “You told us not to say your name to anyone!”

Ree flashed him a skeptical look.

“Your friend said *your* names to my grandmother,” she countered. “What if that had been the one piece of information that stuck in Grandma Hal’s brain, and she mentioned meeting you, and *that* was what led to Mom and Harvey figuring out I’m here?”

“So . . . what are you planning to do instead?” Colin asked. “Are you going to just sit in an attic all summer and only sneak down to see your grandmother when you’re sure your parents are away? Even if seeing you makes her upset because she starts talking about some ghost whose body may or may not be somewhere in this house? And you’re not even going to *do* anything about it?”

Ree looked like she was about to cry.

“I’m doing something,” she protested. “Melanie and Ben and me, we’re searching the attic!”

Colin gazed out across the vast space of the attic with its falling-apart boxes and dusty furniture. From here, he couldn’t see any coffins, but he knew they were there.

“You really need help from Nevaeh and me,” he said.

But Nevaeh wasn’t there. He realized he’d half expected her to come bounding back up the steps and proclaim, “Ha ha, false alarm about my ride. And guess what *I* just figured out?”

But she hadn’t done that. She wasn’t going to. And now Colin had almost made Ree cry, and she was shutting him out again, and he didn’t know how to fix it.

Really, how much help could he ever be alone?

Without Nevaeh?

“Do You Believe in Ghosts?”

Ree’s grandmother didn’t answer Nevaeh. Instead, she started snoring.

“Okay, then,” Nevaeh mumbled.

She looked down at the picture of the two happy little girls again, then back at the old, frail woman in the bed. Nevaeh wasn’t afraid of old people any more than she was afraid of ghosts. But something made her put the picture back on the nightstand with a little more force than necessary. Something made her tiptoe out as quickly as possible.

Back in the hall, she hesitated. She *could* go back up to the attic and tell the others about her conversation with Ree’s grandmother. She could ask Ree and Melanie all sorts of questions. But it felt like she’d changed everything by stalking out before. She’d made a fool of herself, and she didn’t even quite understand why. And wouldn’t Ree already know that her grandmother had grown up in Groveview?

Nevaeh pulled out her phone and started texting her sister, Prilla: **Can u come pick me up?**

Prilla’s response was quick: **Where? Colin’s house?**

Nevaeh was *not* going to tell Prilla she was hanging out at a funeral home.

Or that she’d just abandoned Colin in the funeral home’s attic.

Ct house steps in 5 min? Nevaeh suggested instead.

Deal, Prilla texted back.

Nevaeh thought for a minute.

Did I just help you get out of doing something you don’t want to do? she texted.

Prilla sent back two emojis: the thumbs-up and the kissy lips.

You know you love me! Nevaeh texted.

At least she could do something right today.

She tiptoed down the hall and crept down the staircase at the front of the house. When she got halfway down, she peeked over the banister. The only people she could see in the downstairs hallway had their backs to her. Neither Ben nor Mr. Rhodes were anywhere in sight.

Nevaeh dashed the rest of the way down the stairs and raced out the front door.

When she got to the courthouse—after a short walk that felt much longer in the July heat—she found her brother Roddy waiting for her alongside Prilla. Roddy and Prilla were twins, though they probably looked the least alike of all the Greeveys. That was partly because Roddy shaved his head at the start of each summer to stay cool (temperature-wise, *not* appearance-wise—he had a knobby head), while Prilla had such long, thick hair that she joked her ponytail should be called a “horsetail” instead. They both sat in the oldest of their family’s vehicles, a pickup so ancient that all the Greeveys referred to it as “the Jalopy.” Nevaeh glanced past the Jalopy and the courthouse, to the area that had served as the Zucchini Festival grounds the night before. A swarm of teenagers were dismantling the stage.

“Oh, right,” Nevaeh said. “You were getting extra volunteer hours for your college applications.”

“Correction,” Roddy said, rolling his eyes at Prilla. “Prilla volunteered both of us *and* the entire drama club to help, just because she thought the band kids were signing up, too. But when a certain band guy didn’t show up, she suddenly remembered that, number one, it’s ninety-one degrees out today and, number two, family comes first, and if Baby Greevey says she needs a ride, Baby Greevey gets what she wants.”

Roddy was the only person in the universe who was allowed to call Nevaeh “Baby Greevey.” He was the science guy in the family, the brother who was usually so busy thinking about Einstein’s theories or abstract mathematical formulas that he often failed to noticed there were other humans around him. But the name “Baby Greevey” dated back to when Nevaeh had been a newborn and Roddy and Prilla were five, and, at least according to family lore, Roddy had gone around telling everyone, “Baby Greevey is *mine*. Nobody can hurt Baby Greevey.”

Still, Nevaeh pulled open the passenger-side door of the Jalopy to slug Roddy in the arm and protest, “I’m not a baby.”

At the same time, Prilla slugged him from the other side and protested, “This wasn’t about any band guy. We signed up for a two-hour shift, and our shift is over.”

Roddy laughed and stepped out of the truck, so Nevaeh could slide onto the bench seat of the truck between her brother and sister.

“By ‘band guy,’ you mean Deepak, right?” Nevaeh asked Roddy as he slipped back into the truck beside her and pulled the door shut behind him.

“He’s just a friend,” Prilla said. But she grinned as she slammed the gearshift into Reverse and then, a moment later, into First. Because the Jalopy was so ancient, the gearshift was on the floor, and anytime the driver shifted, the person sitting in the middle had to dodge hard to the right or risk having a kneecap bashed in.

Nevaeh leaned a little harder than necessary against Roddy.

“You’re getting me sweaty,” he complained, even as he slung an arm around Nevaeh’s shoulders.

This was so familiar, Nevaeh hanging out with Prilla and Roddy, all three of them bantering and joke-arguing. The Jalopy lurched forward, picking up speed, and Nevaeh felt more and more like herself. Not like some weird, hysterical girl who couldn’t take being in an attic that might be haunted.

“Do either of you believe in ghosts?” she asked. “I mean, of course you don’t, but . . . what would you say to someone who did? How would you prove they don’t exist?”

“Oh, Nevaeh,” Prilla said, shaking her head with what had to be mock sorrow. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

“What does *that* mean?” Nevaeh asked. “And why are you calling me ‘Horatio’?”

Both Roddy and Prilla burst out laughing. But it wasn’t mean laughter.

“She’s quoting Shakespeare,” Roddy explained. “*Hamlet*, I think? Or is that *Macbeth*?”

Prilla took one hand off the Jalopy’s giant steering wheel and dramatically clutched her heart.

“Alas, I have failed you both, if neither of you recognize that quote instantly,” she moaned, going for the full theatrical effect. “Nevaeh, at least you have the excuse of only being twelve. But, Roddy . . . did you listen to *anything* in English class last year?”

“Nope,” Roddy said. “It’s the school’s fault for scheduling English right after physics.”

“They should have known you better than that,” Prilla agreed. She flipped her bushy ponytail over her shoulder. “Okay, both of you, listen up. That quote is from *Hamlet*, and it’s, like, probably the second most well-known line from the whole play. After ‘To be or not to be,’ of course. This is how Hamlet explains to his friend Horatio that he’s been talking with a ghost. Because there’s more in the world than just what Horatio sees and knows about. Horatio is too practical and logical for his own good.”

“Whatever,” Nevaeh said. “Isn’t *Hamlet* the play where pretty much everybody dies? So Shakespeare had to make some of the characters ghosts. Or else he wouldn’t have enough people onstage for a whole play. But that’s *just* a play. Not real life. Roddy, I know *you* wouldn’t believe in ghosts. Because they’re not scientific, right?”

She needed her science-obsessed brother to back her up on this one.

“Sorry, kid,” Roddy said, even as he hugged her closer. Or covertly wiped more of his sweat on her T-shirt—sometimes it was a little hard to tell with older brothers what was really happening. “If you’re looking for certainty, you’re not going to get it from me. I don’t have enough data on this issue to know. I don’t waste my time worrying about ghosts like out of *Hamlet* or *Ghostbusters* or—what’s another example from pop culture?”

“*The Shining*,” Prilla said. “*Scooby-Doo*. Or—”

“Yeah, those,” Roddy said. “But as a scientist, I can’t rule out the possibility of ghosts completely. There *are* things in this world we don’t understand yet. And as a scientist, I can tell you, it’s easier to prove that something *does* exist, not that something doesn’t.”

“You’re no help,” Nevaeh grouched.

She waited for Prilla to say, *Why are you asking about ghosts?*

And then maybe Nevaeh would tell them . . . well, not the whole story of Ree and Ree’s grandmother and the ghostly photos. Nevaeh had promised not to mention Ree’s name to anyone. But Nevaeh could tell a *little* of the tale. Just enough. And then Prilla and Roddy would tell her that it wasn’t possible that Nevaeh had sensed anything unearthly in the funeral home’s attic. Maybe that was all Nevaeh needed. She needed them to continue being themselves: total Greeveys who didn’t get spooked by anything.

Because then Nevaeh could go back to being like that herself.

But Roddy's gaze had gone vague, as if he'd sunk back into working out physics problems in his head. That *was* his natural state. This was why if there was anyone else with a driver's license available, Nevaeh avoided riding in a moving vehicle with Roddy at the wheel. But even Prilla had a far-off, distant look in her eyes now. She whipped the steering wheel suddenly to the left, turning down an unfamiliar street.

"Hey," Nevaeh complained. "This isn't the way home."

"It . . . can be, if Route Twenty-Three is closed for repairs," Prilla muttered.

She turned again. And again.

"Prilla, this is a dead-end street!" Nevaeh complained.

"Is it?" Prilla asked. "Guess I'll have to turn around."

She slowed way down, much more than was necessary to make the wide swoop around the circle at the end of the street to get back out of the cul-de-sac.

Off to the side, Nevaeh saw a familiar red pickup, with the words "Three Brothers Moving Company" stenciled onto a sign on the driver's side door. Below those words, there was another stencil still taped to the sign. A can of spray paint stood on the curb.

"He wasn't joking!" Prilla squealed. Prilla was not a girl who squealed, and now she'd done it two days in a row. "They really are putting their band name on their truck, like I suggested! I told him to have more confidence in their band—and he believed me!"

"Prilla, is this *Deepak's* house?" Nevaeh asked.

"Maybe," Prilla admitted. Her grin only widened.

"I thought you said girls who go out of their way to drive past boys' houses are just being silly," Nevaeh said.

"I said if girls do that *constantly*, they're being silly," Prilla said.

"No, you didn't," Nevaeh said.

"Well, maybe I was wrong," Prilla said, her smile softening only a little. "Maybe I wasn't being fair, saying that. Because I didn't understand what it's like."

"Have you been possessed by aliens?" Nevaeh asked. "What happened to my real big sister?"

But Prilla didn't answer. She just kept gazing off, as dreamily as Roddy.

“Wish I was old enough to have my license,” Nevaeh muttered.
“Neither one of you is safe to drive right now.”

Prilla didn't answer that, either.

But Nevaeh didn't really wish she was old enough to drive. She wanted things to go back to normal, not change more.

19

Surprise News

Colin didn't text Nevaeh when he got home.

She'll text me, he thought. She'll tell me about why she really left so early, and then we'll figure out what to do next.

Nevaeh didn't text.

Colin told himself it didn't matter because they'd be working together the next day, helping both their families clean out a house where some old man had died.

But Monday was another blisteringly hot day, and it seemed to have put everyone in a bad mood. Colin's mom and Nevaeh's dad acted like they were on the verge of a fight right from the beginning.

"No, you and your kids *can't* just start taking everything out of the living room right away," Colin's mom scolded Mr. Greevey the first time he touched a box. "The Nadings hired both of us, remember? They have a very specific list of family heirlooms they'll want to keep, and they're trusting me to sort things out."

Colin felt a little proud of the way Mom stood up straight and as tall as she could (for someone who wasn't even five feet) even as Mr. Greevey towered over her.

Mr. Greevey stared down at her for a second, opened his mouth, shut it, then opened it again.

"It's your funeral if you want to do things the hard way," he said with a shrug. "I thought you'd want us getting the stuff that's clearly junk out of the way first, but if you don't trust me to be able to tell the difference between junk and family heirlooms, we'll go out and work in the barn first. Because I know they didn't hire you to take care of anything that might be covered with old manure. Come on, Greeveys."

That was an insult, wasn't it? Colin thought. *He might as well have just come out and called Mom a snob. Because he thinks she called him stupid.*

"I'm just trying to do the job I was hired to do!" Mom snapped.

Colin shot a pleading glance at Nevaeh. Couldn't she fix this?

"Hey, um, Dad?" Nevaeh spoke up. "How about if I stay in here with the Creedmonts? As they sort through things, I'll bring out the boxes they're done with."

"Okay, fine," Mr. Greevey said, rubbing his forehead.

"But Nevaeh's just trying to stay in the air-conditioning," Nevaeh's brother Dalton complained. "And avoid touching manure."

"Don't you wish you'd thought of that before she did?" Mr. Greevey said, with just a trace of his usual good humor.

All the Greeveys except Nevaeh trailed out. Even then, though, Nevaeh and Colin couldn't really talk because Mom was right there. Mom let out a little huff of air as she began taking things out of an old trunk.

"Broken, ripped, worn-out, garbage," she muttered under her breath, tossing each item into a box as she spoke.

"At the rate you're going, we'll have this whole room cleared before everyone else even makes it out to the barn," Nevaeh said.

Colin was almost jealous. He wished he'd thought of saying that to Mom. Or saying *something* nice.

"Colin, you can start carrying those piles of old newspapers out," Mom said. "Nevaeh, I'll have this box ready for you to carry in just a minute."

Colin bent over to lift the first huge stack of newspapers, one of dozens piled along the wall. Then he noticed that the headline on the top newspaper said "All Ohio Schools Closed for Rest of Year Due to Coronavirus Pandemic." That was just from April 2020, not even that long ago. But the newspaper was already yellowed, already brittle with age.

"But, Mom, what if some of these papers are historic?" he asked.

"Take them outside, and we'll let the Greeveys figure out which ones are *valuably* historic and which ones aren't," Mom said. "The Nadings want all evidence of their father's hoarding out of here."

Colin lifted the top newspaper to see what the next one down said. What if there was a paper from 1930 somewhere in these stacks? And what if that paper let Colin find out what happened to the boy who might be haunting the funeral home?

“Colin?” Mom said, her voice a little gentler than before. “I know *you* think all that’s interesting, but the Nadings are paying us to clear things out, not to read.”

“Oh, right,” Colin said guiltily. He lifted the biggest stack of newspapers he could carry in his arms at once and started walking for the door.

He saw Nevaeh wince as she lifted the box Colin’s mom had just filled. Colin couldn’t help peering over her shoulder as he and Nevaeh both moved toward the foyer, side by side. A scrap of fabric with an interesting pattern lay near the top of the box. An old rubber ball with the face of a clown jolted up and down beside that, in a jumble of pens that had probably run out of ink a decade ago. And . . .

“Probably not a good time to take pictures,” Nevaeh whispered sympathetically. She knew Colin liked to take photos of particularly intriguing old things he found, even though his mother regarded all of it as junk.

“Easy for you to say,” Colin whispered back. “I saw you jerk back when you lifted that box. You acted like Mom was making you carry manure.”

It was so weird how he and Nevaeh could be so different. And how each of them was also different from their parents. They’d joked before that they were actually switched at birth.

“Yeah, it just . . .,” Nevaeh began.

Maybe she was about to lead in to a different conversation, one about what had happened in the attic of the funeral home the day before. Maybe everything was about to go back to normal between him and Nevaeh.

But just then, Colin heard Mom’s phone ring.

“Hello?” Mom answered in a normal voice. Then a moment later, her voice came out sounding strangled—not like Mom at all. “Dead? He’s . . . dead?”

20

Reactions

Nevaeh saw Colin drop the newspapers he was holding and race toward his mother.

“Mom?” he called. “Mom! Who’s dead?”

Mrs. Creedmont made a sound Nevaeh had never heard anyone make before. It was part cry, part wail, part gasp.

Nevaeh dropped the box she’d been carrying and took off running. But she went in the opposite direction. She shoved her way out the door and sped toward the barn.

“Dad!” she hollered. “Dad, come quick! Colin’s mom needs help. Somebody . . . somebody . . .”

She was running so fast, she couldn’t get quite enough air in her lungs to say the word “died.” She didn’t understand yet what was happening. She just knew, whatever it was, it was something an adult should deal with.

Dad poked his head out the barn door. His normally genial face twisted with worry.

Maybe Nevaeh sounded just as unearthly as Mrs. Creedmont.

And maybe Nevaeh didn’t look normal, either. Dad took one glance at her face and took off running for the house. He was a big man. He never ran. But he did now.

Nevaeh spun around and chased after him, back to the house.

She and her dad burst in just as Colin was repeating numbly, “It’s my father? My father’s dead? Before I ever got a chance to know him?”

Mrs. Creedmont put an arm around Colin’s shoulders. But she didn’t pull him close. She just stood there, staring blankly.

“Felicia?” Dad said, in the world’s gentlest voice. It was barely a breath, light as a feather. “Can I—”

Mrs. Creedmont flinched.

“Lloyd,” she said. Her voice was like rock. “You, of all people. I can’t talk to you right now. I have to go. Colin and I have to go.” She spun around—spun herself and Colin around—as if she’d forgotten how to find the door. “You can tell the Nadings, Lloyd. Say there’s been a family emergency.”

“Colin!” Nevaeh cried. “Are you all right?”

That had to be the world’s dumbest question. Colin was letting his mom tug him along. It was hard to say which of them looked more dazed.

“Talk to me!” Nevaeh pleaded. “What are you thinking?”

Also a stupid thing to say. Colin didn’t look capable of speech. Or thought. He didn’t look like he would even be able to walk, if his mother hadn’t been steering him toward the door.

“I’m so sorry, Felicia,” Dad said. “Are you going home? You shouldn’t be alone right now.”

“She won’t be alone,” Nevaeh said. “She’ll be with Colin.”

Dad went on as if Nevaeh hadn’t even spoken.

“I’ll call Pam,” he said. Pam was Nevaeh’s mother. “Do you want Pam? Or some other friend? Or . . .”

“Pam,” Mrs. Creedmont whispered.

Dad was already pulling out his phone. Mrs. Creedmont shoved her way out the door, pulling Colin with her.

“Wait!” Nevaeh said. She felt a little frozen herself. Or like her brain just wasn’t working normally. “Colin needs somebody with him, too. I should go with Colin and his mom, too. I should—”

She wanted to say, *I’m the only person besides his mom Colin has ever talked to about his dad.*

But that wasn’t entirely true. Colin had told Nevaeh only a little bit about his dad and his parents’ divorce. Colin had no memories of his dad. Colin had been a baby when his parents split up, and since then he hadn’t seen or heard from his father—not even with so much as a birthday card or a phone call.

But Colin hadn’t really *talked* about how any of that made him feel. He’d just said that Nevaeh was the one he’d want to tell, when he did want to talk.

Dad lay a hand on Nevaeh’s shoulder, pulling her back.

“I know you’re trying to help,” he said. “But you need to let Colin and his mom have their privacy right now. It’s a delicate situation, and you can’t just rush in and say the first thing that pops into your head.”

Is that what Dad thinks I would do? Nevaeh thought indignantly. *Does he think I’m . . . that much like him?*

Dad was already pressing the phone to his ear, starting to describe what had happened, what he thought Nevaeh’s mom should do. Nevaeh was standing close enough that she could hear her mother’s voice through the phone, reassuringly strong: “Of course I’ll go be with her. At her house?”

“Mom, stop by and pick me up on your way!” Nevaeh shouted toward the phone. “I’ll help Colin while you’re helping his mom!”

Dad shook his head at her and stepped farther away.

Prilla walked into the house just then.

“I got deputized to find out what’s going on,” she said, even as she brushed cobwebs out of her hair and off her clothes. “Why did the Creedmonts leave just now? What happened?”

“Colin and his mom just found out that Colin’s dad died,” Nevaeh reported. “They went home to . . . to . . .” How could she describe it? “To deal with the shock. Dad’s telling Mom to go be with Mrs. Creedmont, but he won’t let me go and be with Colin. It’s like he thinks I would make things worse, not better. But I wouldn’t! I promise! Colin *needs* me! Prilla, will you take me to the Creedmonts?”

Nevaeh saw Prilla dart her gaze toward Dad, who’d moved even farther away, to the other side of the room. He was speaking in a low tone now, as though he didn’t want Prilla or Nevaeh to hear. Then Prilla peered straight back at Nevaeh, her mouth twisted into a grim frown. Nevaeh waited—she knew not to rush Prilla when she was making up her mind. This was a sister-to-sister moment, and Nevaeh needed it to turn into a “kids against adults/adults don’t understand anything” moment. Then Prilla pursed her lips and arched her eyebrows, and Nevaeh knew exactly what Prilla was going to say.

“Dad’s wrong,” Prilla muttered. “Of course I’ll take you.”

21

Colin in Shock

Colin's mom didn't say anything as she drove. She'd flicked the radio off as soon as they'd gotten into their SUV, so there wasn't even the distraction of music or some NPR voice. The countryside flashing by was bland, barely noticeable: Cornfields. Soybean fields. Farmhouses far away, down long lanes.

The wheels of the SUV turned quietly on the pavement. The engine hummed.

But even that tiny amount of sound was enough for Colin's brain to work it into a rhythm, a churning flow of words: *My father's dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. He's gone. Gone, gone, gone . . .*

Now he truly was fatherless.

"I always thought . . . I thought that someday I'd meet him," Colin choked out. "I thought someday I'd talk to him and find out—"

"You were never going to meet him," Mom said. Her voice was like a knife slashing down, lashing out. Cutting off Colin. "I never would have allowed that."

But someday I was going to grow up, Colin thought. Someday it would have been my choice, not yours.

But not now that Colin's father was dead.

Not ever.

"Will there be . . . a funeral?" he asked. "Will we go?"

"Why would we do that?" Mom scoffed.

Mom never talked to Colin like that. She'd never before aimed that much scorn in his direction.

"I'm his son!" Colin protested.

"And I'm his ex-wife!" Mom countered. "Ex-wives aren't . . ."

The SUV was starting to shimmy a little. Mom must have noticed, too, because she hit the brake. Colin leaned to the side and saw the glowing speedometer numbers plummeting: eighty-five . . . eighty . . . seventy-five . . . The speedometer reached fifty-five and stayed there, right at the speed limit. Mom was following the law exactly now.

“I hate that he’s put us in this position,” Mom said.

“By dying?” Colin gasped.

Mom drummed her fingers on the steering wheel.

“Funerals are for honoring the dead,” Mom said. “If we went to his funeral, people would think . . . they’d think . . .”

“That we cared?” Colin asked.

They were at the edge of town now. Mom stopped at a red light and buried her face in her hands.

“I can’t . . . I can’t . . .” She swallowed hard. “I shouldn’t be talking to you about any of this right now. I’m going to say something that you’ll need years of therapy to recover from. And that’s not fair to you. I’m your mom. I’m the only parent you’ve got. That’s been true for years, but . . . now it can’t ever be anything but true.”

Did that also mean that even Mom had thought that someday Colin and his dad would meet? That somehow Colin’s dad would change and become a real father, a good father—a father Colin could love?

Someone honked behind them, but Mom still kept her face buried in her hands.

“Light’s green now, Mom,” Colin said, his voice coming out harsh and mean.

Mom put her hands back on the steering wheel. She stared straight out the windshield. She didn’t say anything else the rest of the way home, and neither did Colin.

Nevaeh’s mom was just pulling up to the curb when they got there. Mom parked crookedly and sprang out.

“You didn’t have to come,” Mom told Mrs. Greevey. “I’m fine. I should really just turn around and drive back, not miss a day of work just because . . . because—”

“Hush,” Mrs. Greevey said. “You don’t have to be fine all the time.”

She stepped out of her car and wrapped her arms around Mom. And Mom began sobbing against Mrs. Greevey’s shoulder.

Mom didn’t cry. Mom certainly never *sobbed*.

Colin eased his car door open and tried to sneak past them.

“Colin—” Mrs. Greevey began.

Colin kind of waved at her with one hand and pointed at Mom with the other. He hoped Mrs. Greevey would interpret the gesture as *Oh, don’t mind me. You just take care of Mom.*

Maybe it worked, because she didn’t chase him down to give him a hug, too. Colin went into the house and back to his own room. It looked the same way it always did: neat and tidy and uncluttered, because everything in the Creedmont house was neat and tidy and uncluttered. But it didn’t feel like the same room he’d awakened in that morning. The air felt too still. The light slanting in through his blinds felt too harsh.

It didn’t feel like his room anymore. Or maybe it was that he didn’t feel like himself anymore.

What was he supposed to do now? Throw himself across his bed and sob, like Mom?

Is that what I want to do?

He couldn’t quite figure out what he felt or why.

He heard the front door open and shut, then there were footsteps across the living room.

“—so strange it was a heart attack. He didn’t even act like he had a heart.”

This was Mom’s voice, twisted and bitter.

Colin couldn’t stay here. He couldn’t listen to Mom right now. And it was impossible *not* to hear her, as long as he stood in his room. Their house was too small for secrets.

He moved over to his desk and pulled out a piece of paper.

Went for a bike ride, he wrote. I have my phone with me.

Even his handwriting didn’t look right now. The w’s wobbled. The *I* dribbled off the page.

But he left the paper in the center of his otherwise empty desktop. Technically, he wasn’t supposed to go anywhere without permission, but he didn’t have it in him to walk out into the living room right now. He couldn’t have put a question together. He couldn’t have heard an answer over the buzzing that had started in his ears.

He left his room and went out the back door of the house, easing it silently shut behind him. He got his bike out of the shed.

At first he rode aimlessly, turning corners at random. He went faster and faster; that was almost a way to keep himself from thinking.

He found himself in front of the library, and he remembered how eagerly he'd told Ree about all the research they could do there. How could it have been only a day ago when he'd invited her and Melanie and Ben to the library with him and Nevaeh?

He'd been such a little kid a day ago. A baby. He hadn't known anything.

What I should have researched was my dad, he thought.

It occurred to him that he could do research about his dad right now. He didn't need the library. He could just google his father's name on his phone.

Colin stopped and pulled out the phone and typed in his father's name. And . . .

He couldn't make himself hit the arrow to start the search.

I already know my mom thinks my dad was a terrible person, he told himself. *Do I really need to find out why? Especially now that he's dead?*

It didn't matter anymore.

Nothing about his father should have ever mattered because Colin had never mattered to his father.

Colin just wanted to stop thinking about him.

He jammed his bike onto the bike rack and walked into the library.

The librarian at the front desk glanced up and said hello. Colin liked this librarian, but he didn't want to be noticed by anyone right now. He pretended not to notice *her*.

Kids were crowded around the summer-reading table just past the front desk, and adults were clustered around all the computers. Colin sped past all of them. He needed to hide out in the section of tall bookshelves where nobody else ever went or bury himself in one of the empty back rooms.

Bury, he thought. *Ha.*

Was everything about death today?

Even the mystery Nevaeh and I were working on with Ree—the ghost boy. Can't have a ghost without someone dying first.

Colin felt his face quiver. The back of his eyes stung.

I can't burst into tears right here in the middle of the library, he told himself in horror. *Can't, can't, can't . . .*

He darted into the genealogy and local history room. And . . .

It was empty.

Empty of people, anyway. Its shelves were crowded and mazelike, stuffed with old maps and old phone books and Groveview High School yearbooks and graduation programs dating back so far that Nevaeh had once found one with her great-great-grandparents mentioned in it. Colin knew that the maze of shelves led to an old fireplace with a giant mantelpiece framed with wrought-iron sconces—standing in front of the fireplace, you could squint a little and easily imagine yourself in some ancient English mansion in the 1700s, not a midwestern library in the twenty-first century. Colin shoved his way far enough into the genealogy and local history room to see the fireplace, and then he finally let himself relax. He leaned back against a bookshelf. This, finally, was a place to hide.

But the bookshelf creaked in protest—maybe he shouldn't have picked the oldest bookshelf of all to lean against. This bookshelf was so ancient that its books were held behind glass; there was a little metal plaque at the top that read "State and National Books Mentioning Groveview." Really, it was a little pathetic that all the books written by outsiders noticing Groveview could fit in one little wooden cabinet. And the books on these shelves were so old. Still searching for something to distract himself, he scanned the titles: *Surveyors of the Northwest Territory*; *Civil War Soldiers from Ohio*; *Unsolved Ohio Mysteries . . .*

Colin jolted back so far, he knocked against another shelf. And then he bent down and opened the latches of the glass doors. His hands shook. Wasn't *Unsolved Ohio Mysteries* the title of the book with the picture of the ghost boy? The book he'd only ever seen in an excerpt online?

Colin edged the book out from the shelf. It was so old, the pages seemed to be sewn together, not glued. Colin opened the book and saw a date: 1931.

So . . . just a year after the ghost boy died?

Colin's heart beat faster. A mystery could easily stay unsolved for a year. But that didn't mean that it had *never* been solved.

He flipped through the pages—well, as quickly as anyone could turn pages that were nearly a hundred years old. Someone had left slips of paper at intervals throughout the book, someone who'd written in impossibly neat, old-fashioned writing, "This was determined to be a

hoax” on one page and “The neighbor was convicted of murder for this poisoning” on another.

He found the page with the ghost boy photo, and—yes!—there was a slip of paper here, too. He had to flip it over to read:

“This book must have gone to press before the rest of the story came out. See *Groveview during the Great Depression* for more information.”

Colin went from loving whoever had left all the paper slips to feeling deeply annoyed with them.

Couldn't they have made a copy of the page from that other book and just tucked it in here? he wondered.

A piece of the paper slip broke off in his hand, and he reconsidered. The paper slips probably dated back to a time before copy machines or printers.

He scanned the titles on the bookshelves behind the glass doors again, but none of them were *Groveview during the Great Depression*. It made sense. Why would someone from outside Groveview write a book like that?

Colin darted over to the “Written by Local Authors” shelf. Some of the “books” there looked about as professionally assembled as something a sixth grader might turn in at school. But there it was: *Groveview during the Great Depression*. It looked like just a collection of ancient, yellowing newspaper articles glued down on pages with comments in the same handwriting from the *Unsolved Ohio Mysteries* paper slips.

In another mood, Colin might have enjoyed reading the comments—one said, “We ate a lot of possum that winter, and were glad to have it.” But he was desperate to find out about the ghost boy as quickly as possible. It was almost like he thought it could make up for everything that was awful today—his father dying, his mother acting so strangely, his father never having anything to do with Colin, anyway . . .

Colin flipped pages. He found the same article he'd seen in *Unsolved Ohio Mysteries* and online. The handwritten comment below was

This was only the beginning of the story . . .

Colin turned the page.

And then he dropped the book.

Nevaeh Finds Colin

“There!” Nevaeh screeched. “That’s Colin’s bike!”

Prilla hit the brakes a little too hard and swerved into the library parking lot.

“You want me to wait here or go in with you?” she asked.

“You can go back to work,” Nevaeh mumbled. “It’s better not to have Dad totally mad at *both* of us.”

She glanced at her phone to check the time—they’d been gone from the Nading job for an hour now. First they’d stopped in at Colin’s house and discovered that he’d left, and he wasn’t answering text messages or calls. Then they’d driven up and down the streets of Groveview looking for a boy pedaling furiously—and maybe unsafely—on his bike. But if he’d ended up at the library, that was a good sign.

The library was his and Nevaeh’s *place*. It was something they shared. If he’d come here, it was almost like he was asking her to find him.

“Remember what I told you,” Prilla said. She’d spent a lot of the drive giving advice.

“This is about Colin, not about me,” Nevaeh recited dutifully. “I have to let him set the tone for the conversation. Because he’s the one who’s just endured a trauma.”

“And now you know about as much as I do from taking AP psych,” Prilla said with a sympathetic grin. She pulled up to the drop-off zone and put the truck in Park. She glanced down at her own phone on the seat between them. “Oh, look—Dad’s texts have gone from ‘You are grounded forever’ to ‘Okay, Mom texted and said you were right to take Nevaeh to Colin.’ Dad’s not mad at either of us anymore!”

Nevaeh’s own phone dinged.

“And now he’s telling me I can stay as long as Colin needs me, and I can just come home with Mom,” Nevaeh crowed. “Kids rule!”

“Yeah, maybe tone down that exuberance a little before you meet up with Colin,” Prilla muttered.

“Oh, right,” Nevaeh said, opening her door and sliding down to the ground.

She watched Prilla pull away before squaring her shoulders and turning to face the library.

She felt a twinge of nerves.

This is Colin I’m going in to talk to! My friend! Why should I be nervous about talking with Colin?

She took a deep breath and began walking forward. Her pace slowed the closer she got to the door.

I begged to come. This is what I wanted. I need to be there for Colin.

But what if she said the wrong thing? What if Dad was right, and she only made things worse?

She had to force herself to reach for the curved handle of the library’s front door. She took another deep breath to prepare herself to tug it open. She closed her eyes for a moment, still not ready. Maybe what she was doing could actually be called praying.

And then the door swung out, slamming into her.

A split second later, someone barreled into her, practically knocking her down. She had to struggle to right herself, to disentangle herself and land solidly on her own two feet.

“Watch ou—” she began. Then it registered who had run into her. “Colin?”

He had his head down, his chin buried in his chest, his arm across his face. He was running without looking where he was going, his head bowed so low that she could see nothing of his face between his curly dark hair and his plain red T-shirt. Colin was the only person Nevaeh knew who wore T-shirts with no words or images on them, nothing about a sports team or a band or a business or an opinion.

But at the sound of Nevaeh’s voice, Colin peeked out.

He was crying.

Just as quickly as he’d revealed one teary eye, he turned his head and dragged his arm back across his face.

“Oh, Colin,” Nevaeh said. “I’m so sorry.”

She reached out and put her hands on his shoulders, because it seemed like he was in danger of falling, too. It seemed like he needed someone to hold him up. He was still that off-balance, bent over at the waist, twisted off-kilter.

Colin jerked away, almost hitting his head on the doorframe.

"I don't want anyone to see me like this," he growled. "No one should . . . see me cry!"

"Okay, let's find you some privacy," Nevaeh agreed.

She grabbed the wrist of his free arm and began tugging him away from the door and then around the corner of the building away from the parking lot. Colin let her lead him, but then when they reached the side of the library, he moaned, "Windows . . ."

"I know," Nevaeh said, glancing back regretfully at the floor-to-ceiling glass of the library's new addition. "But there's this other place. . . ."

She kept pulling on his arm, dragging him into the tall rows of forsythia bushes beyond the library's windows. In the spring, these bushes were always full of brilliant yellow flowers, but now they were just leafy and green and perfect for hiding. At first the long, trailing branches snagged against her and Colin's hair and clothes. But then they were in the shadowy gap between bushes, a hidden spot where the branches blocked out the light—and would keep anyone from seeing her and Colin.

"Oh, good, it's still here," Nevaeh muttered, pulling Colin down to sit beside her on the bare dirt. Now they had a canopy of branches above, a nest of roots beneath, and a small, cozy space around them.

Colin lowered his arm again. He had tears streaking down his cheeks and his eyes were still watery, but he seemed too stunned to keep on actively sobbing.

"Only you," he mumbled. "Only you would know there was a space like this in here. . . ."

"Nah," Nevaeh said modestly. "A couple other kids who were the younger brothers and sisters of library helpers, like, five years ago, they know, too. Because we used to play hide-and-seek out here while we were waiting on our older brothers and sisters. Of course, maybe everyone else has forgotten." This made her sad, suddenly, the idea that kids she'd played with again and again probably didn't care anymore. They probably didn't care about Nevaeh anymore, either. She started to say that to Colin, but then remembered why they were there. "Oops, sorry. I shouldn't be

talking about myself. You can talk now. I'm here for you. You can say whatever you want."

Colin didn't say anything. His eyes welled up with tears again, and he yanked his arm across his face. Now the tear streaks went sideways.

Nevaeh waited.

And waited.

She was not good with silence, and she was starting to notice a little too much how her bare knee was touching Colin's bare knee. It was just awkward, when neither of them were talking.

And Colin had said he didn't want anyone to see him crying. What if he meant he didn't want Nevaeh to see him, either?

Now Nevaeh *really* couldn't stand the silence.

"See, Prilla gave me some advice," Nevaeh began. "Something she heard about in her psychology class. When someone dies—or, really, anytime there's a trauma or anything bad happens—you can think of people as being in rings of circles. The person closest to the dead person is at the center, and every ring out from that person is further away. So you're in the middle of this, and I'm in the next circle out. And it's not right for me to dump my feelings on you or say things like 'Colin, I was so upset that Dad didn't want me to come help you!' The people in the outer circles should only dump their sadness and anger on the people who are further out than them, and I should only send help and care in to you. But I don't know. This makes me want to keep saying, 'Colin—how do you feel? Are you okay?' And if I were you, that would drive me crazy. So I was thinking . . . I'm doing it again, aren't I? Talking about me, not you?"

Colin's eyes were still so watery. Was she making things worse?

"I'm not in the center," he mumbled. "Mom is. And I didn't help her. I just got mad at her and ran away. . . ."

"That's okay," Nevaeh murmured. "My mom's with her now."

"Are you sad about my dad dying?" Colin challenged. "Are you angry?"

"Well, yeah," Nevaeh said. "Of course. He's your dad. And I always thought—"

"You thought there'd be some fairy-tale ending, where I'd find my dad someday, and Mom would be wrong, and he'd turn out to be a nice guy, after all—or maybe meeting me again would *make* him into a nice guy?" Even in the shadowy light under the forsythia bushes, Nevaeh could see

that Colin's face was turning redder and redder now. He almost sounded angry at Nevaeh. He positively glared at her. "Is that what you thought?"

"Maybe?" Nevaeh whispered. Even though she kind of thought Colin actually meant that was what he'd thought; that was what *he'd* been hoping for.

"Well, forget it." Colin was breathing hard now. "My dad's not like your dad. My *family's* not like your family. It's just me and Mom, and she can't help me right now because *she's* at the center of your stupid circle, and she hates my dad and . . . do you know what I started thinking, just now? That now that my father's dead, what if he becomes a ghost and haunts me? But you know what? If he didn't even bother coming to see me when he was alive, why would he bother haunting me when he was dead?"

"You don't want him haunting you, do you?" Nevaeh asked tentatively. "Not if he's—"

"He's still my dad!" Colin snarled. "Everybody wants their dad to love them!"

And then Colin collapsed against Nevaeh's shoulder, his face smashing against her collarbone. He sobbed into her T-shirt. Nevaeh put her arm around him, and then wondered if Colin wanted her arm around him.

Maybe he didn't because he jerked back suddenly and swiped his arm across his face again.

"This is stupid that I'm crying," he said.

"Your dad just died," Nevaeh said. "You're allowed to cry."

"But I didn't even know him," Colin protested. "And it's okay for girls to cry, but the way people act, with boys, we—"

"What? Boys aren't allowed to have feelings?" Nevaeh challenged. She couldn't help rolling her eyes. "*That's* what's stupid." Then she realized she'd just insulted someone who was crying *and* had just lost his father. "I mean, you can react however you want to react. You . . ."

Colin stared at her stonily.

"Do you know what's funny?" he said. "I'm not actually crying about my dad. Or—I wasn't. Not when I ran into you, I don't think. I came to the library because I didn't want to think about my dad anymore. I was looking up stuff about the ghost boy at the funeral home. And *that's* what made me cry."

Nevaeh felt a little like she was getting whiplash. Apparently she needed way more psychology training than the twenty minutes' worth that

Prilla had told her about from Prilla's high school class. How had Colin switched from talking about his dad to talking about the ghost boy so quickly?

"You're crying about the *ghost boy*?" she asked uncertainly. "*That's* what made you run out of the library sobbing?"

"Yeah," Colin said. "Because there wasn't just one of them. There were two."

Could someone get whiplash on top of whiplash?

"What do you mean?" Nevaeh asked. "Sure, it looked like there were two boys in some of the pictures. But you said yourself that was just trick photography. Because the boys looked exactly alike, except for how they were posed. It had to be the same kid. Er—corpse."

"Yeah, that's what I thought before," Colin said. "But I was wrong. Because there really were two boys who died. They just didn't find the second one's body right away. Those pictures with two boys? Those weren't a double exposure. They were pictures of identical twins!"

The Ghost Boys

“*Twins?*” Nevaeh repeated. “How could that be? What made you think that?”

“I read about it at the library,” Colin said. “In a book called *Groveview during the Great Depression*.”

Nevaeh didn’t react right. Her face lit up. She playfully slugged his arm.

“Look at you, walking into the library and right away solving more of our mystery,” she said. “You are the *best* at research!”

This made Colin feel a little bit better. Enough, anyway, that he could explain why it made him cry.

“No—this isn’t good news,” he said. “It’s awful. Things just keep getting worse and worse. It wasn’t just one boy who died falling off a train back in 1930. It was two. That’s twice as bad. These two twin brothers ran away from home together, I guess, and so there was a family somewhere out there missing two boys and not knowing what happened. And then they died together, but the one boy’s body was found before the other’s. And then . . . well, I don’t actually know what happened next. Because it just seemed so sad to me. It was too much. So I dropped the book and I ran away, and . . . I don’t know. My dad dying, those boys dying . . . it’s too much death.”

Nevaeh patted his knee. And that helped, too.

“We can stop,” she said. “We don’t have to do anything else about the ghost boy. Er—ghost *boys*.”

Colin let himself peer straight into Nevaeh’s eyes. They were so familiar, though a little more rounded and worried than usual.

“But you don’t want to stop working on the ghost boy mystery,” he protested. “You want to solve this. You wouldn’t be Nevaeh Greevey if you just walked away from a mystery.”

“Except, I do kind of want to stop,” Nevaeh said. She lowered her head and stared down at her empty hands for a moment. Then she looked back up at Colin, her eyes fierce now. “Maybe I’m not the same as I used to be? Standing in the funeral home attic yesterday—being at the funeral home at all—that kind of thing never would have bothered me before. But yesterday . . . I don’t know. It was so weird. I didn’t feel like myself. I couldn’t remember how to act like myself. It scared me so much, I had to run away.”

“You ran away yesterday, I ran away today . . .,” Colin muttered.

Strangely, it made him feel better to hear that Nevaeh wasn’t always perfectly brave, either.

Nevaeh snorted.

“You had a better reason,” she said. “Your father died. Even if you don’t remember him . . . now he can’t ever be part of your future, either. It’s like . . . didn’t you think we were going to find out good things with Ree’s mystery, too? Not that *two* boys died?”

“Yeah,” Colin said. “Yeah.” It helped that Nevaeh understood. Even if he didn’t understand himself. Even if she didn’t understand *herself*.

Even if they were both changing.

He plucked at a lone blade of grass that had somehow managed to grow in the bare dirt shadowed by the forsythia bushes.

“Really, we’ve been dealing with death all summer,” he said.

“Huh?” Nevaeh asked.

“Think about it,” Colin said. “All those houses you’ve cleaned out with your family, and all the ones I’ve cleaned out with Mom. Most of the time, it’s because the people who lived there died. Or *sometimes* it’s because old people are getting close to death, and it’s not safe for them to live in a house with stairs anymore or in a place far from their kids. . . . What our families do, it’s almost as much about death as what Ree’s mom and stepdad do.”

“Whoa.” Nevaeh reeled back. “I never thought of it that way.”

Colin pulled too hard at the blade of grass, and it came out of the ground, roots and all.

He’d killed it.

He instantly tried to tuck it back into the ground and pack dirt around it, but it sagged limply.

This was ridiculous, but tears crowded back into his eyes again.

“Hey,” Nevaeh said. “Hey.” She pulled his hand back. She packed the dirt around the grass a little more forcefully. This time the blade stood up.

“You’re going to make me go back in the library and read the rest of the articles about the ghost boys, too, aren’t you?” Colin asked weakly.

“No,” Nevaeh said. She sounded more thoughtful than usual. It was like even she was inching forward, trying to find the right words. “But I’m going to make myself do that.”

I am the type of person who runs away from hard things, Colin thought. *But . . . that doesn’t mean I have to be the type who never runs back.*

He sighed.

“I’ll go with you,” he said.

“You don’t have to,” Nevaeh said.

“But I want to,” Colin said. “I need to.”

Both of them stood up and crouch-walked their way out of the shelter of the forsythia bushes. They brushed off the twigs and leaves that had gotten caught in their hair and on their clothes. And then, as solemnly as two soldiers marching off to war, they went back into the library.

“Back here,” Colin directed, leading the way. “In the genealogy and local history room.”

The *Groveview during the Great Depression* book was still lying on the floor, right where Colin had left it. Nevaeh bent over to pick it up.

“I can read it first,” she said. “And then I’ll let you know if it’s too horrible for you to read right now or not.”

“No, that’s okay,” Colin said. “We can read it together. I’m all right to do that now.”

And he really did mean it. But when Nevaeh turned back to the second page about the two boys, he had to blink a couple of times to make his eyes focus. And then he found he could only absorb bits and pieces of the news article.

“. . . second boy’s body found barely a hundred yards from the first . . .”

“. . . sheriff theorized one must have jumped or fallen first, and the second was trying to rescue his twin when he tumbled to his death as well . . .”

“. . . unusually cold weather had kept everyone from searching more closely until now . . .”

“Ready to turn the page?” Nevaeh asked.

“Wh-what?” Colin stammered.

“It says there’s more of the story on the next page,” Nevaeh said matter-of-factly. “But I can wait until you’re done reading this one.”

“No, no, go on,” Colin said weakly.

Nevaeh turned the page. Thick, black headlines glared up at Colin: “Dead Boys Were Orphans from Up North” and then “Hotel Owner Who Gave Them Home, Jobs, Sees Picture in Paper, Tells Tragic Tale.”

Colin had barely started into the smaller print of the story below the headlines when Nevaeh gasped.

“Look!” she cried. “The writing at the bottom!”

Colin skipped past the rest of the news article, all the official-looking words in tiny dark newspaper print. The handwritten comment at the bottom of the page was much fainter, the ancient ink having nearly faded away. But he could still make out the words; he could still understand why Nevaeh had gasped.

The handwritten comment said:

This was the only part of the tale that was ever told publicly. But the Taggarts and the Lesters knew what didn’t make the paper.

Below that was only one line, cramped and hard to read, because it was crowded onto the bottom of the page. But Colin could still make out the words:

Oh, and the Greeveys knew, too.

24

What the Greeveys Knew

“Hey, Dad,” Nevaeh said. “Which of our Greevey ancestors were alive in 1930?”

It was evening now, after dinner. Ever since she’d seen the spidery writing on old paper at the library, Nevaeh had been longing to ask her dad this question. And a slew of others. But she’d bided her time. She’d waited until he’d showered after work. She’d waited until he’d sat in the air-conditioning long enough to stop sweating. She’d waited until he’d had his favorite meal—chicken and peppers straight from the grill, which she personally had volunteered to cook, to make up for missing a whole day of work with the family while she was hanging out with Colin.

But even with all that waiting, Dad still gave her a suspicious squint.

“Are you trying to butter me up by asking a question like that?” he asked. “Trying to make up for directly disobeying me even though . . . well, I guess you *might* have been right about Colin needing you?”

“No, no!” she protested. She widened her eyes, hoping that would make her look even more innocent. “I’m really interested!”

Dad put his feet up on the hassock in front of the portion of the family room couch that he always sat on. He picked up the TV remote and clicked off whatever he’d been watching—Nevaeh had very carefully waited, too, until the TV was showing only a commercial. He patted the couch cushion right beside his.

“Okay, settle in,” he said. “Because you know you don’t ask a question like that without getting a long story. Let’s see, 1930 . . . my dad wasn’t born yet, but his parents would have been teenagers then. Not much older than you. They were Melvin and Lorna. Well, Lorna wasn’t a Greevey yet, but she was going to be. Does that count?”

"I guess," Nevaeh said, though she really wanted to say no. Because the handwriting in the *Groveview during the Great Depression* book hadn't said anything about people who were going to marry into the Greevey family.

"Melvin—now, *he* was a character," Dad said. As if Dad himself weren't. "Of course I only knew him as an old man, but he's the only person I ever met who loved junk as much as I did. He tended the family junkyard like it was a garden. You could say to him, 'I need a carburetor from a 1953 Buick,' and he'd lead you right to it. Or 'a chain for a porch swing.' Or whatever. He used to laugh every time he heard the word 'recycle' because he'd been doing that his whole life. Oh, those were the days."

"You mean, when you were a kid, right?" Nevaeh asked.

"Yeah," Dad said. "But that was a long time after 1930. I'm not *that* old. Why do you say 1930 in particular?"

"I was reading a book about the Great Depression," Nevaeh said, and it was a relief that she could tell the truth. Just not the whole truth.

"Right, right." Dad nodded, as though that was a perfectly normal thing for a twelve-year-old to read about in the summertime. Of course in the Greevey family, it was. "Did I ever tell you how much Groveview relied on the junkyard back then? The mayor even gave my great-grandparents a medal once, saying the junkyard saved people's lives. It was a time when just about everybody was poor. Even starving, sometimes. Hardly anybody then could afford to buy anything new."

Saved lives, Nevaeh thought. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled a little.

"I don't understand," she said. "What was it about the junkyard that saved lives? It wouldn't save anybody's life to have a porch swing—you can't eat *that*! So why'd they get a medal?"

"Oh, I guess because the junkyard also supplied parts for tractors and plows, so the farmers could grow food," Dad said. "And being able to fix a car, that meant the person could drive to work. And . . . oh, you know how politicians talk. They exaggerate sometimes. They give out medals saying 'You saved lives!' when, really, you just made life more bearable. I think that medal's still in my office somewhere. In the box that's labeled something like 'Saved from Shutting Down the Junkyard.' You could go look at it if you—"

Nevaeh had already sprung up from the couch. She gave Dad a quick hug.

“Thanks, Dad! I will!” she told him, even as she dashed away.

Finding something in Dad’s office was like conducting an archaeological dig. Nobody could accuse him of exaggerating when he said in his TV commercials, “I LOOOVE junk!” Every spare inch of space in his office was covered with odd finds: old doll heads and railroad spikes and rusty old nails woven together into a basket. . . . It always made Nevaeh a little itchy, seeing all that clutter. But even she had to admit that it was well-organized clutter. It took her only a few moments to find a box labeled “Junkyard Mementos.” And somehow, she lucked out, because the medallion bearing the words “Groveview Lifesavers” lay right on top. Below it was an official-looking document that proclaimed to all that the Greeveys were a family committed to saving lives, blah, blah, blah. Nevaeh wanted to giggle at some of the lofty language—there was a “heretofore” and an “endeavoring mightily” and an “in recognition of this noble family’s innovation . . .”

“They ran a *junkyard*,” she muttered, as if she could talk back to the document from nearly a hundred years ago. “What they did to save lives was hand out junk!”

But then she came across a line in the rows of tiny print that made her sit up straight and stop giggling. The line was “Though circumstances limit the extent to which the full account of your heroism and ingenuity can ever be known publicly, those who are in the know will always remember and ever honor your virtuous deeds. . . .”

Wait a minute, Nevaeh thought. *Everybody knew my Greevey ancestors ran a junkyard. It’s almost a hundred years later, and my dad still knows they sold and gave out junk to people in and around Groveview during the Depression.*

So what “virtuous deeds” could they possibly have done that would never be known publicly?

Then she saw the mayor’s signature at the bottom of the document: apparently, in 1930, the mayor of Groveview was a man named Willard Lester.

Lester, Nevaeh thought. *That book said the Lesters, Taggarts, and Greeveys were the only ones who knew the rest of the story about the ghost boys. This all has to connect!*

She reached for her phone to text Colin.

What Colin Found Out

“I’m sorry,” Mom said. “I know this has been a hard day for you, too.”

By Colin’s count, it was approximately the fiftieth time Mom had apologized since he’d gotten home. He hadn’t quite finished eating dinner—a casserole and salad that Nevaeh’s mom had put together before she’d left—but he pushed his chair back from the table, anyhow.

“Mom, it doesn’t matter,” he said. “You’re fine now, and so am I. Dad dying—it doesn’t change anything about you or me.”

A little voice in his head whispered, *Except that it does. Only, I don’t know how yet. And . . .* He ignored the voice and hoped that the grin he’d plastered on his face looked convincing enough to Mom.

She reached out and ruffled his hair.

“You’re such a good kid,” she said. “I’m so lucky.”

This didn’t sound entirely convincing, considering that her eyes were puffy from crying and her face was too pale. She didn’t *look* like she felt lucky.

But Colin stretched his grin even wider.

“Does that mean I can use your laptop tonight?” Colin asked.

Mom laughed, and he felt a little proud of himself. Sometimes pretending that everything was normal was a way to get back to normal.

“You are such a scammer,” she said. “But you know what? I don’t feel like working tonight. I’m going to take it easy so, sure, you can, too. Are you doing more photography research?”

“Kind of,” Colin said. “In a way.”

He moved his plate from the table, then he took Mom’s laptop back to his room. He sprawled across the bed. But when he powered up the computer, he didn’t click into any of his favorite photography sites.

He began studying genealogy charts.

People actually post this stuff online? he marveled. *For anyone to see?*

That seemed bizarre, since he'd watched Mom have to answer questions like "What's your mother's maiden name?" and "Where were you born?" as security questions.

But through the library website, he could find chart after chart of Groveview residents' family histories. He took one look at a family tree of Greeveys—not surprisingly, there were lots of them—but he figured Nevaeh could handle that research. So he focused on Taggarts and Lesters instead. He told himself he was only interested in people alive in 1930. But the lines of names kept pulling him forward, down one branch after another. He got to the end of one line of the Taggart family—Lyle Taggart—and there was a note below: "Last owner of Taggart's Funeral Home. Had no children to pass it down to." And that made Colin impossibly sad.

Was there anything my dad thought he would pass down to me someday? he wondered. *Is there anything I just don't know about that . . .*

He decided to stop thinking about his father.

He switched back to looking at the Lester family trees available online, but the names just ran together. All these people had had so many relatives. With so many brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and cousins, they must have felt so certain about where they fit, where they belonged.

Mom and me, we're like that blade of grass I pulled up today, he thought. *Rootless.*

Colin's family had always just been him and Mom. His dad dying just made that feel more . . . stark. Colin had never known any grandparents. Mom had been an only child, so there weren't any aunts or uncles; any cousins he had were from far-distant branches, and he'd never met them. And probably never would.

This research was just making Colin jealous of other people's families. And lonely. He reached up to X his way out of the charts completely, but he did it clumsily, accidentally hitting a new link instead. A new family tree appeared on the screen, that of some guy who'd been mayor of Groveview from 1925 to 1945. He'd had eight children.

Yeah, yeah, good for him, Colin thought, tipping over into bitterness.

The family had given their kids really goofy-sounding names—or names that sounded goofy now, anyway: Cecil and Blythe and Milton and

Halcyon . . .

Wait a minute—Halcyon?

Was it possible that could be made into the nickname “Hal”? As in Ree’s Grandma Hal? The person who was the whole reason Ree thought her new home might be haunted?

Colin clicked on Halcyon Lester’s name. The chart that came up showed that she had had a daughter named Harmony . . . and a granddaughter named Serena.

Colin grinned—a real grin this time—and grabbed his phone to text Nevaeh.

Ree’s grandma was one of the Lesters! he wrote. What if THAT’S how she knew about the ghost boys in the first place?

Even before she saw the pictures? Or any ghosts?

What if she went looking for the pictures on purpose when they moved into the funeral home? Because being there made her remember the dead boys?

His phone dinged immediately, as if Nevaeh had been just waiting to hear from him. Or no—she wasn’t replying. Their texts had crossed.

I found something about the Greeveys in the 1930s, she wrote. We’ve got to go talk to Ree RIGHT NOW! Both of us! Together!

Colin laughed and shoved the laptop to the side. He actually hugged the phone.

Together . . .

Sure, all those old-timey people had big families. But being related to people by blood wasn’t the only thing that mattered.

Friends counted, too.

Telling Ree

Nevaeh and Colin stood on Ree's front porch. It felt like a miracle that they'd been able to go there right away. The rest of Ree's family had left for the evening, so she'd said it was a good time for Nevaeh and Colin to come over. Colin's mom had fallen asleep super early, even before it was dark out, so he'd felt okay about tiptoeing out and leaving a note. And, miraculously, Nevaeh had managed to convince Prilla that she *wanted* to drive Nevaeh back into Groveview again. (Or, actually, maybe that wasn't such a miracle. The only thing Nevaeh had to say was, "Doesn't Deepak practice with his band on Monday nights? If you had to drop me off to see a friend, wouldn't that give you a good excuse to hang out and watch their band practice for a while?" Nevaeh hadn't had to ask twice. Prilla was different than she used to be, but she was becoming predictable.)

Now Nevaeh lifted her hand to knock, but the door swung open before she made contact. Ree stood in the shadows just inside the door—clearly she'd been waiting.

"Okay, what did you have to tell me that was too much to just text?" she asked even as she motioned for Colin and Nevaeh to come in. She cast an anxious glance out the door before shutting it tightly. Then she gestured toward a curved couch nestled in an alcove beside the grand staircase, as if she wanted all three of them to sit down.

Nevaeh peered cautiously past Ree. "You're not going to make us go up to the second floor or the attic to talk? Did your whole family go out to some cemetery for a burial or something?"

"My whole family went out for ice cream," Ree said. The corners of her mouth sagged a little, like she was still *trying* to smile but finding it a

struggle. “Even Grandma. And going out with Grandma for ice cream . . .” She gulped. “That used to be our thing.”

“You should stop hiding,” Colin said. He actually reached out and clutched Ree’s arm. That wasn’t like Colin at all. His voice sounded deeper than usual—maybe even desperate. His eyes careened wildly. “You need to tell your mom and stepdad you’re here, and you’ve *got* to convince them to let you stay. You shouldn’t miss out on having ice cream with your grandma and the rest of the family. You—”

Ree jerked away from him.

“If you’re just going to lecture me, you can leave,” she said. Her voice was icy. “You don’t know my family. You don’t know how mad my mom would be if she found out I was here and that I’d lied to her and sneaked around. . . . I don’t want her to ever know. She’d be so *disappointed*.”

Nevaeh tried to catch Colin’s eye, but it didn’t work. So she settled for pulling Colin toward the couch. Both of them sat down, and that felt like a way of saying, *No, we’re not going to leave. We’re here for you.*

“Colin got some bad news today,” Nevaeh said, as if she needed to apologize for his behavior. “He’s still kind of . . . shaken.”

That was all Nevaeh intended to say about it, but Colin immediately spoke up, like he couldn’t hold the words in: “My father died.”

Ree gasped.

“Colin, I’m so sorry,” she said immediately. “You don’t have to be here now. Everything I’m wondering about, about the ghost boy—it can wait.”

Nevaeh heard how Ree’s tone changed completely at the mention of death. She seemed to be as good at comforting a mourner as her grandmother or her stepdad.

“It’s okay—I’d rather talk about solving your mystery than think about my father,” Colin said. He clenched his teeth for a moment, then went on. “I didn’t know him. So it’s not like he was ever really a *father*.”

“I didn’t know my father, either,” Ree said. “He died when I was a baby. But Mom and Grandma Hal and my other grandparents, they’ve told me so many great stories.”

“Yeah, well, there aren’t any great stories out there about my dad,” Colin said bitterly.

Ree seemed not to know what to say to that.

“Anyhow, about *your* mystery,” Nevaeh said, jumping in because the other two kids both looked so uncomfortable. So stuck. “Ree, we found

more newspaper articles, and we know all about your ghost boy now. His name was either Warren or Russell Null. They were twins, and when they were fourteen years old—”

“Fourteen?” Ree repeated. “That boy looked about nine in those pictures!”

“Yeah, well, Great Depression, not enough food to eat . . .” Nevaeh didn’t want to dwell on this part too much, or else she might be in as much danger of crying as Colin looked to be right now. “Warren and Russell were orphans, and they lived in this small town up near Lake Erie called Water’s Edge. They worked at a hotel doing odd jobs, and the man who ran the hotel let them stay there, too. It was their only home. But then they ran away.”

Nevaeh thought about how the newspaper article had quoted the hotel owner, Luther Shade: “Those boys never showed an ounce of gratitude for my Christian charity. Everything I’d given them, and then they stole my good silver and hopped the first train out of town. . . .” Somehow she wanted to leave out that part of the story. It seemed wrong to speak ill of two poor dead boys even now, nearly a hundred years later.

But doesn’t that make it seem worse that Luther Shade would say so many mean things about them back in 1930? When he knew them, and they had just died?

“Go on,” Ree urged. Then a thoughtful look crept over her face. “Or are you thinking I can just figure out the rest? These two fourteen-year-old boys, Warren and Russell, they ran away by sneaking onto a train, and then one of the boys fell off when the train was passing through Groveview. And the boy died. But I don’t understand. How can you not know if the dead boy in the picture is Russell or Warren? Didn’t anyone ever find the other boy? Because he . . . escaped?”

“No,” Colin said. “*Both* boys died. It just took longer to find the second boy’s body.”

He still had such a bitter look on his face. It almost felt like he *wanted* this to be a completely sad story, like he needed to believe that the whole world was terrible and always had been.

“Oh,” Ree said. She slumped down onto the couch as if her spine had suddenly gone limp. She blinked. “I thought . . . I thought I’d be able to fix this for Grandma. At first I just wanted to prove to her that there wasn’t any ghost. Then, whether I believed in the ghost or not, I thought I’d be

able to find out who the boy in the picture was, and the next time Grandma thought she saw him, she and I could just whisper together, ‘Hello, Joe, you had a good life, but it’s time to move on’—or something like that, like they do in movies. But . . . but . . . it sounds like this Warren and Russell *didn’t* have good lives, not if they felt like they had to run away. And then they died way too young, and—”

“Stop!” Nevaeh cried, surprising even herself. She couldn’t take both Ree and Colin sounding so gloomy. “That’s not the end of the story about Warren and Russell.”

Quickly, she told Ree about the handwritten comment inside the book about Groveview during the Great Depression, the one saying the story told publicly was incomplete and only the Taggarts, Lesters, and Greeveys knew the rest. Colin pulled out his phone and showed Ree pictures he’d taken of each newspaper article, each extra comment.

Then he started telling her about what else he and Nevaeh had found.

“*Is your grandmother’s first name really ‘Halcyon’?*” Colin asked Ree. “*Was she the daughter of the mayor of Groveview, all those years ago?*”

“Yes!” Ree exclaimed. The “I’m about to cry” look had vanished from her face. “That was part of the reason my mom and stepdad wanted to move here, because it’s where Grandma Hal lived as a kid. Then her dad got a job working for some congressman, and the whole family moved away when she was in high school. But how did you know any of that?”

“You do not mess around with Colin’s research skills,” Nevaeh said, grinning as though it was her own accomplishment. Of course, she’d gotten some important information out of her dad, too.

But Colin was still talking about Ree’s grandmother.

“Was ‘Halcyon’ a typical name back in 1940 when she was born?” he asked.

“No, no—Grandma Hal says she’s never met anyone else named that.” Ree shrugged. “I don’t even think it *is* a real name. It’s just a word meaning peaceful and happy. But her parents naming her that—it kind of started a family tradition, with names with similar meaning. At least ‘Harmony’ was a little more common of a name when my mom was born. And then I got ‘Serena’—nobody thinks there’s anything weird about me being named Serena!”

“If your grandmother wasn’t born until 1940, everything with Warren and Russell Null had already happened,” Nevaeh said. “But do you think

her family talked about it? Do you think they might have told her the secret that only the Lesters and the Greeveys and the Taggarts knew?"

Ree shook her head slowly.

"Even if they did, she doesn't remember it now," she said. The mournful look was back in her eyes. "Or, anyhow, she doesn't remember it well enough to talk about it. Except to say, 'I saw the boy! The boy was here again!'"

Nevaeh shivered and remembered that she was sitting in a funeral home. Even though it was still light outside, their little alcove was shadowed. Probably Ree liked it that way, so no one could see them from outside. But Nevaeh really wished they could turn on a light.

"Maybe I have something that might jog your grandmother's memory," Nevaeh said. She pulled out the Groveview Lifesavers medallion and certificate she'd found in the box in her father's office. She pointed out the line about how the "full account" of the Greeveys' "heroism and ingenuity" couldn't be known publicly. "It doesn't make sense! It's not like anyone can hide a junkyard! That was public!"

Strangely, Ree only seemed to be half listening. She took the medallion from Nevaeh's hand and absentmindedly fingered its lettering. And then she dropped it on the couch and took off running up the stairs.

"Ree?" Nevaeh called after her.

Colin yelled, too: "Ree, do you want us to follow you?"

"Just stay there!" Ree called back over her shoulder. "Just wait a minute . . ."

In a flash, she was back, holding something round in her hands.

It was another medallion, imprinted with the same lettering: "Groveview Lifesavers."

"Did your grandmother have one of those herself? Like, maybe some of the medals went to people in the mayor's family, too?" Nevaeh asked. "Because they were Lesters who knew the secret?"

"No," Ree gasped. She stopped, seeming to need a minute to catch her breath after running up and down the stairs so fast. "No, this isn't my grandmother's. This belonged to the Taggarts. It's something Melanie and Ben and I found in the attic, and we didn't know what it meant."

"We still don't know what it means," Colin said, frowning.

"But it means *something*," Ree said. "People in a funeral home don't ever get to be called 'lifesavers.' Because they only ever deal with dead

bodies.”

“So for someone at the funeral home to have gotten that medal . . . ,” Nevaeh began. “For someone at Taggart Funeral Parlor to be called a lifesaver along with some of the Greeveys . . .”

Ree finished for her: “There had to be somebody who didn’t actually die.”

What Changed for Colin

“Unless . . . ,” Colin whispered.

Ree and Nevaeh both whirled toward him. They both had the same look of fevered excitement on their faces. Ree’s face was just a lot redder, from running up and down the stairs a moment earlier. But they both looked so happy, so certain that they were on the right path toward solving the mystery.

Colin felt like he was about to do something cruel. But he couldn’t stop himself.

“Unless it really doesn’t mean anything at all,” he said. “Unless it was just one of those things people say—‘Oh, you’re such a lifesaver,’ when the only thing the person’s done is, I don’t know, given you a stick of gum. Or let you know you’ve got food stuck in your teeth. Something little like that.”

“It was the Depression!” Nevaeh protested. “People didn’t have money lying around to make medallions like this over little things like a stick of gum! These medallions meant something! We just have to figure out what it was!”

“The Taggarts did do the embalming for free,” Ree pointed out, looking a little doubtful now. She picked up Colin’s phone from the couch where he’d dropped it and seemed to be scanning the newspaper stories showing on the screen. “Maybe the other two families paid for an obituary in the paper or paid for a burial plot once the boys’ bodies were identified. Those are all expensive things.”

Nevaeh grabbed both of the medals and shook them at Colin and Ree.

“These are expensive things, too!” she practically shouted. “Look, you know funeral home stuff because of your family, but I know junk and

antiques and collectibles because of mine. And these medallions aren't made out of something cheap like tin. I don't know what embalming or burial plots or obituaries cost—or what they cost back in 1930—but I bet you could buy a lot of them with what these medallions are worth. It doesn't make sense to give an expensive medal out to honor people for doing something that doesn't cost as much!"

"Okay," Colin said, blinking hard. "Okay."

He had such big emotions inside him. He didn't want to upset Nevaeh and Ree any more than he already had. But he also didn't want them to get their hopes up too high. Or maybe it was that he didn't want to get his own hopes up too high. Not today.

"Oh no!" Ree suddenly cried. Both Colin and Nevaeh whipped their attention back to her. She had her hand cupped beside her ear, then she pointed toward the driveway outside. "My family! They're back early! They didn't have time to order ice-cream cones, let alone eat them. So what's going on? But you've got to go—out the front door! Hurry!"

She began tugging on Colin's and Nevaeh's arms, pulling them up from the couch and yanking them toward the door. But then she huddled with them in the foyer, holding them still for an instant. She kept her head tilted as if she was listening hard. Colin could hear tires on the pavement outside. And then the car was clearly past the front of the house, turning toward the garage around back.

"Okay, now!" Ree exclaimed. "Sneak! Stay hidden behind the trees until you're out to the sidewalk! And—"

"Ree, would it really be that bad if your parents found you here?" Colin asked. "If they found us here?" There were so many things he wanted to say, so many things he hadn't been able to say before.

That it was hurting Ree to sneak around.

That it was too hard to keep secrets.

Maybe also that it hurt him to see her so worried because he could see how it had hurt him and his mother with the secrets they'd kept.

"If you told your parents you were here, then the next time your family takes your grandmother out for ice cream, you could go, too," Nevaeh said. "You just have to tell your mom and stepdad the truth."

"No, what would happen is that Mom would send me away," Ree countered, sounding frantic. "And I might never see my grandmother again while she's still, you know, herself. Mostly. Please! Help me!"

She opened the door and practically shoved them out. Colin and Nevaeh both crouched down to slink across the porch and then out toward the sidewalk.

We're acting like we're the ones who did something wrong, Colin thought. We're acting guilty when all we're doing is keeping a secret for Ree.

He wanted to turn around and march up to Ree's mom and stepdad and tell them, *Pay attention to what's going on in your own family, in your own house! Maybe you'll find out something you really, really need to know about your own kid!*

But he didn't do that. He just kept running away.

Nevaeh Works Alone

Nevaeh and Colin were only a few blocks from the funeral home when they each got the same text from Ree: **Sorry! I guess Grandma Hal started feeling bad. That's why they all came home so fast.**

Hope she feels better soon! Nevaeh typed back.

There was such a long pause that Nevaeh wondered if Ree had put her phone down. But then the next text came: **It wasn't, like, her throwing up. It was her getting confused and upset and crying and screaming.**

And then: **That's not going to get better. Just worse.**

"What are we supposed to say to that?" Nevaeh asked Colin.

Colin shrugged helplessly.

"You're better at talking to people than I am," he said.

Nevaeh stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, her fingers poised over the phone. Finally she just went with **Sorry about that.**

Ree didn't reply.

"I guess the best thing we can do is figure out what the Groveview Lifesavers medals mean, and anything else we can find out about Russell and Warren Null," Nevaeh said. "That'll cheer Ree up. Maybe we should look up this Luther Shade guy, too, the one who owned the hotel where the boys worked before they ran away. And—"

Just then, Colin's phone rang. Colin glanced at it, then raised it to his ear.

"Hi, Mom," he said. He turned, as if he didn't want Nevaeh to see his face as he listened. Nevaeh couldn't hear anything Colin's mom said, but after just a few seconds, Colin started nodding. "Yeah, yeah, I'm on my way home now."

He hung up but stood frozen for a long moment.

“Was she mad?” Nevaeh asked. “You can tell her it’s my fault that—”

“Is there really a difference between being mad and being sad?” Colin asked. “It feels the same sometimes, you know?”

And then Nevaeh didn’t know what to say to that, either.

Colin gave a half-hearted wave as he turned to go. He was several sidewalk squares away before Nevaeh thought to holler after him, “See you tomorrow! Don’t worry—we will figure all of this out!”

And then Nevaeh was alone on the sidewalk. She still had forty-five minutes before Prilla was supposed to pick her up, so she started trudging to the library by herself.

Back in the genealogy and local history room, Nevaeh mostly just walked around, trailing her fingers across the spines of ancient books.

Colin is so much better at this kind of research than I am, she thought. *I’d rather just talk to people to find things out!*

But she couldn’t think of a single person she knew who’d been alive in Groveview in 1930. This wasn’t like the first mystery she and Colin had solved together, when almost everyone who was keeping secrets was still alive.

Still, she pulled random books down to glance at, in hopes that *something* would be useful.

That’s how she found a pamphlet titled *Cemeteries of Groveview*.

Russell and Warren Null were both listed in the index.

Nevaeh immediately began typing a text to Colin and Ree: **I know where our ghost boys are buried!!!! Section B, plots 171 and 171½ of that cemetery that’s over toward the Walmart. Right here in Groveview!**

And then, just as she was about to send the text, she stopped.

Ree and Colin were both feeling sad right now. They both had *reasons* to feel sad.

And this wasn’t good news that Nevaeh had found. If Russell and Warren were buried in Groveview Cemetery, that almost certainly meant they had both died here. As kids.

Neither Colin nor Ree needed to hear more bad news right now.

Nevaeh erased the text and wrote one to Prilla instead: **Would you mind waiting an extra half hour to pick me up?**

No prob, Prilla shot back.

Nevaeh took pictures of the maps of Groveview Cemetery that were in the pamphlet, then put it back on the shelf. As she left the library, she kind of hoped she'd run into someone she knew, so she could brag, "Yeah, I'm so brave, I'm headed out to the cemetery *all by myself*. Why? Oh, didn't you hear? Me and this other kid, Colin, we started our own business. We solve mysteries. *Interesting* mysteries that no one else can figure out. . . ."

But none of the kids she knew were at the library.

That's fine, she told herself. I wouldn't have time to stop and talk, anyhow. I'm going to have to walk really, really fast to get to the cemetery and back before Prilla shows up. Or before the sun goes down. . . .

She was brave, but she was *not* hanging out alone in a graveyard after dark.

It took longer to get to the cemetery than she had expected, and then it was more spread out than it had looked on the maps. Nevaeh gulped and pushed her way in through an ancient wrought-iron gate mounted between two stone pillars.

The gate squeaked eerily.

What if I freak out like I did in the funeral home attic? she asked herself. *What if I run into a ghost here?*

She reminded herself she still didn't believe in ghosts.

She didn't think so, anyway.

And, really, in the sunlight, on such a hot July evening, it was easy not to believe in ghosts. Even in a cemetery. Nevaeh had been here before, as a little kid when her grandfather died. Her memory of the funeral was of people crying and being more serious than Nevaeh could have really understood at age four or five. But at the cemetery, Mom and Dad had let Nevaeh and Prilla and Roddy and some of their cousins run around playing tag while all the grown-ups and the older kids stood solemnly around the casket held above the open grave. One of Nevaeh's aunts had tried to shush the kids and ordered them to wait in the car if they couldn't be quiet and respectful. But Dad had said, "Oh, come on, don't you think the old man would *love* this? I bet he's looking down from heaven right now, laughing along with his grandkids!" And then Dad had taken all the kids over to a separate section of the cemetery, so they could play where no one could hear them.

Nevaeh had been grateful for all the wide-open stretches of green grass that day. But this evening, it was a *lot* to walk through on her way to

Russell and Warren Null's graves. An old man on a riding mower was zooming between the gravestones over by the fence, and Nevaeh was half tempted to ask to hitch a ride to get there faster. But she kept going, and finally she reached the older section of the cemetery where most of the tombstones announced birth dates in the 1800s and death dates in the early 1900s. Right in the middle of that section was a limestone structure that Nevaeh guessed was the building labeled "Mausoleum" on the map. She used her phone to look up the word.

Whoa—sometimes people put a bunch of tombs in a building like that, instead of burying the caskets in the ground? Nevaeh thought. *That's creepy!*

The door of the mausoleum was open just a crack, but Nevaeh had no desire to peek in.

Russell and Warren Null's graves were supposed to be directly on the other side of the mausoleum. But when Nevaeh walked around the building, the ground on the other side was just another stretch of empty grass.

Nevaeh walked completely around the mausoleum. She peered at tombstones at a distance of two or three graves away.

Nothing.

The guy on the mower came rumbling toward her, and Nevaeh waved her arms high in the air to get him to stop.

"What's your problem?" he growled, not very kindly, after he shut down the mower blade, let the engine idle, and pulled off his headphones.

"Are there some gravestones missing?" Nevaeh asked. "Like, were they maybe taken out for cleaning or—"

The man grunted.

"Kid, don't you know how heavy gravestones are? We don't go moving them around. You want to clean something, you do the work right here."

"No, I'm not saying I want to clean anything, it's just—" She pointed at the map on her phone. "The people who are supposed to be buried here, they don't have their names on any of these stones."

This time the man snorted, as if she'd said something funny.

"Don't you know not everyone leaves someone behind who wants to remember them? You gotta love somebody a whole lot to shell out hundreds or thousands of dollars just to pay for some rock when they kick the bucket. Or just have a lot of money to throw away. I've already told my

kids, cremate me, toss my ashes wherever you want—and don't waste a dime paying for some stone monument someone's going to have to mow around for the rest of time!"

He glared at her like it was her fault the gravestones made it harder to mow. Nevaeh tried to ignore the glare; she tried to keep herself from glaring right back at him.

"Oh, um . . . does that mean these boys could be buried here, and nobody bought them a gravestone?"

"You catch on real fast, don't you?" the man said sarcastically.

Did he have to be so nasty about it?

The man was already reaching down for the controls, ready to start mowing again.

"Wait!" Nevaeh cried. She couldn't leave yet. "What if . . . what if someone thought there really *weren't* any bodies buried here? Like, how would you arrange to have the cemetery people dig the grave back up, to find out?"

"Let me put it this way, missy," the man said. "You got a court order to do that? Or do you feel like going to jail? Those are pretty much your choices. You can't dig up a body just because you want to."

And then he pulled his headphones back on and started the mower again, quickly steering away from her.

Nevaeh didn't move. She prided herself on not crying very often—certainly not over stupid things—but tears welled up in her eyes.

Just then her phone dinged. It was Prilla: **Where are you???? I just pulled in at the library and it's been closed since 8 and there's no one here. . . .**

Nevaeh texted back immediately: **Can you pick me up at the cemetery instead?**

Prilla's reply was even more question marks but then an **OK**.

When Prilla pulled up in the Jalopy, Nevaeh took off running toward it.

"I thought you might be dead," Prilla said as Nevaeh climbed in. Prilla did not look like she was joking. Her face was paler than usual, her freckles too distinct. "I looked around and around that library. . . . I thought you might have been kidnapped. Man, is this what it feels like to be Mom or Dad when *I* miss curfew? And then you're at a . . . *cemetery*?"

"It's because of something I'm working on with Colin," Nevaeh said defensively.

“Was Colin here with you?” Prilla said, looking around. “Did his mom pick him up and just leave you here?”

“No, he went home early, and then I walked here, and—”

Prilla put her hand over her heart.

“Seriously, Nevaeh, you’re just a little kid—”

“I’m not a little kid!”

“But every time I drive away from home with you in the vehicle with me, Mom or Dad says, ‘You are hereby responsible for *both* of our precious daughters, so drive carefully!’”

“They do?” Nevaeh said. Even though Prilla was kind of yelling at her, this made her feel good.

“Okay, maybe not every single time,” Prilla admitted. “But usually!” She pounded her hand against her breastbone as if she needed to give herself CPR. She was being totally melodramatic. “It would *kill* me if something happened to you, and it was my fault. You know that, don’t you?”

Nevaeh felt her face turning red.

“It wouldn’t actually be your fault if I had—”

Prilla waved that away.

“Greevey family rules,” she said. “It’s *always* the older kid’s fault. What were you thinking? I know this is Groveview and it’s usually safe, but . . .” She peered out the windshield. “You were in a deserted cemetery, and—oh, wait, it’s not actually deserted, it’s completely empty except for a creepy old guy on a mower over there?” She pointed across the cemetery.

Nevaeh wanted to say, *He wasn’t actually creepy, just mean*. But that wouldn’t exactly help her case.

“I . . . I was just trying to help Colin,” she said. “You know, because of his dad dying today, I thought it’d be good if I did some extra work and surprised him. . . .”

Prilla let her hand fall to the steering wheel. Then, with her other arm, she reached over and drew Nevaeh into a hug. This meant the stick shift dug into Nevaeh’s leg, but for once that didn’t matter.

The hug felt good.

“And hearing about Colin’s dad dying has me thinking about how sometimes life is shorter than you think, and death could come for anyone, anytime . . . and so you shouldn’t take anyone or anything for granted,” Prilla said. Her voice was softer now. Forgiving. “Listen, I don’t know how

you thought coming here was going to help Colin, but . . . let's figure out a better way to do it, okay?"

"Okay," Nevaeh whispered.

And then she got an idea.

The Surprise for Colin

The next few days passed for Colin in a blur. He and his mom both went back to work the next day. Dimly, he noticed that everyone in Nevaeh's family treated them with exaggerated kindness—Nevaeh's dad even asked Colin's mom, "Do you have a preference about which room of the house we work on first? Is there anything extra we can do to help you out?"

But Colin might as well have been a machine or a sleepwalker. He carried boxes without glancing into them. He dropped stacks of old newspapers and magazines into recycling bins without a second thought. He didn't notice anything he wanted to take a picture of.

And he didn't let himself think about his dad or the ghost boys at all. Somehow they'd become forged together in his mind—everything about death and dead people and the past felt like they were connected.

It was a little odd that Nevaeh seemed to be avoiding talking to him about the ghost boys, too. But Colin didn't let himself think much about that, either.

Then Thursday afternoon, he turned around from carrying the last box of the day to the Greeveys' truck and found himself practically nose to nose with Nevaeh.

"Um, a little personal space here?" he asked, taking a step back. "Because . . ." He flapped his shirt a little, letting in air. "Because I'm *really* sweaty."

"Don't worry—I'm sweaty, too," Nevaeh said. "We both stink. But I just called your name *six* times, and you didn't notice. I had to do *something* to get your attention."

"Um . . .," Colin said. He really was trying to focus, but it wasn't working well.

Nevaeh snapped her fingers and pointed at him.

"This is what you're going to do," she said. "You're going to go home and take a shower right away, and then Prilla and I are going to pick you up in an hour. And maybe wear a nice shirt because we're going back to the funeral home, and we might need to look like we blend in."

In another mood, Colin might have joked, *Blend in with dead people, you mean?* and they both would have laughed. Or at the very least, Colin would have asked, *Did you or Ree find something else? Did you figure out anything else about the ghost boys? Or did Ree's grandmother see the ghost boy again?*

But he just said, "Okay," in a voice that sounded lifeless even to his own ears. He didn't really want to go anywhere. But it was easier to agree than to explain why.

So when he and his mom got home, he told her he wanted to take the first shower. He was still slow and sluggish at it, and had barely tugged a shirt on over his wet hair when his phone dinged with a text from Nevaeh: **We're here!**

"I'm headed out with Nevaeh!" he called to Mom as he shoved his way out the front door.

Prilla and Nevaeh were in the Greevey truck they all called the Jalopy, but they were much more dressed up than he expected. Nevaeh's shirt even had lace on it, and Prilla was wearing a dress. Both of them had their hair pulled back tidily, not spilling out of messy ponytails or lopsided braids like usual.

"Whoa," Colin said.

"Don't get too overwhelmed by our pulchritude," Prilla said. "We're the same old Junk Princesses underneath."

"Does 'pulchritude' mean stinkiness?" Nevaeh asked, waving her hand in front of her face as she scooted to the side to let Colin in. "Because you put on so much perfume, Prilla, that Colin and I might suffocate from it before you get to see Deepak."

"Beauty!" Prilla countered. "Pulchritude means beauty! You'll thank me for teaching you that when it's your turn to take the ACT or SAT. And I do *not* have on too much perfume!"

Prilla and Nevaeh went on bantering as they drove off, and Colin could get away with only half listening. But even he could tell there was an edge to their conversation, almost a nervousness.

They pulled up to the funeral home, and to Colin's surprise, Prilla parked the truck and got out along with Colin and Nevaeh.

"Is she . . . helping?" Colin whispered in Nevaeh's ear. "Did you tell her about the ghost boys?"

"No, no, it's just . . ." Nevaeh cast a glance over her shoulder, and Prilla nodded at her encouragingly. Why did both girls seem anxious all of a sudden?

"You have to give him some warning," Prilla said, coming up the sidewalk behind them.

"Okay." Nevaeh bit her lip. She turned and put her hands on Colin's shoulders, holding him in place. "Colin, I think this is what you need, but if I'm wrong, you can tell me right now, and we'll call the whole thing off. We're having a funeral for your dad."

"A . . . funeral?" Colin repeated numbly.

"Right," Nevaeh said, sounding a little more confident. She took her hands off Colin's shoulders and crossed her arms over her chest. Then it seemed like the lace on her blouse might be itchy, because she immediately dropped her arms to her side. "Actually, I guess technically it's a memorial service, because Ree says that with a 'funeral,' it's supposed to mean there's a body there, but . . . anyhow, I arranged this with Ree and Ben and Melanie. Their parents don't know, and they're away right now, but . . . you told me you'd asked your mom if the two of you could go to the funeral for your dad. And she said *she* didn't want to, but I've been texting back and forth with Ree about this, and she says funerals are for the living, not the dead. For the survivors of the deceased. And it seems like *you* need something like that, even if your mom doesn't. So we're having one ourselves."

For a moment, Colin could only stare at Nevaeh in amazement. Then he stammered, "You . . . you . . . invited my dad's friends to come here? For some kind of ceremony honoring him?"

"No—we invited *your* friends," Nevaeh said. "For a ceremony to help *you*."

"Oh," Colin said. And he didn't really *decide* to keep walking forward toward the funeral home, but his feet took him in that direction, anyhow.

When he and Nevaeh and Prilla stepped onto the front porch, the door immediately swept open, and there were Ben and Ree, standing on either side of the doorway. Ben was wearing the same suit as before; Ree was

wearing the purple dress she'd had on the first time Colin and Nevaeh met her.

"I'm so sorry about your loss," Ree said. And somehow the way she said that, it felt like she really meant it, like it mattered for people to say that to him. Like he *needed* people to say that. "Please, come right this way. Parlor One."

The dimness of the hallway that had seemed frightening the week before felt right now; it seemed like what Colin needed after the bright sunlight outdoors.

He turned toward the room Ree indicated, a small, wood-paneled area with a podium at the front and two short rows of chairs, almost all filled. The three teenagers who had worked for Colin's mom that summer—not just Deepak, but his buddies Derek and Daryl, too—were in the back row. Ree and Ben's sister Melanie sat in front of them. Across the aisle were Nevaeh's brothers: Roddy, Dalton, and Axel. Axel had brought his fiancée; Dalton, his on-again, off-again girlfriend, Sadie. (Even though, the last Colin had heard, Sadie wasn't speaking to Dalton this week.)

Nevaeh leaned toward Colin to whisper, "I'm sure Mom and Dad would have come, too, if I'd asked them. But it gets weird with parents, and Mom would have had a hard time not telling your mom about this. So . . ."

"You . . . you did the right thing," Colin muttered.

Ree led Colin, Nevaeh, and Prilla to seats in the front row. Ben walked past them, toward the podium.

"We are here to honor the life of Colin Creedmont's father," he said. "Nevaeh Greevey will begin with a reading from the book of Psalms."

When Nevaeh began to speak, Colin let the words flow over him. There was something about a river, something about healing, something about God comforting his people. Colin had never thought of himself as particularly religious, but when Nevaeh finished and solemnly added, "These are words that have comforted mourners for generations," Colin somehow really did feel better. He felt like he was a part of generations, part of a river of ancestors who had lived and died.

And mourned and carried on.

Then Nevaeh sat down, and Prilla stood up.

"I have been asked to do the eulogy," she began. "This is kind of a strange thing because I never knew Colin's father. I don't even know his

first name or where he lived. And I didn't try to find out."

Colin knew from Nevaeh that Prilla acted in plays and musicals at the high school, but he'd never seen her perform. It didn't actually feel like she was performing right now or being dramatic. It felt more like she was trying to have a conversation directly with him, and everyone else just happened to be there, too.

"'Eulogy' comes from a Greek word, and it means praise," Prilla went on. "You might wonder how I can praise someone I never met and know so little about. But you know me, I can always talk. It's a Greevey skill."

All the Greeveys snickered. So did Deepak, Daryl, and Derek.

Colin felt strangely glad that Prilla could try to be funny in the middle of a funeral.

"You also should know that I'm a drama nerd," she continued. "So of course when I think of eulogies, I think of the famous eulogy Shakespeare wrote: 'Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.'"

Now it did seem like Prilla was *acting*, not just talking. She pronounced every word distinctly; she stood extra erect. If she'd been on a stage, Colin had no doubt she would have been able to project her voice all the way up to any balcony.

But as soon as she said "bones," she went back to sounding like normal Prilla again.

"And who am I to argue with William Shakespeare?" she asked. "But that eulogy always bugged me. Because, sure, even the best person has done some things wrong in the course of their life; even the worst person did at least one or two things right. But it *shouldn't* be that the evil lives on and the good ends. I think anytime anyone dies, we should try to carry on all the good things they did and get past the bad ones. And even though I know nothing else about Mr. Creedmont, I know there is one absolutely good thing that I—or anyone—can say about him: He is survived by his son, Colin. And Colin is *amazing*."

Colin had not been expecting that. He also was not expecting the tidal wave of emotions that hit him. It was everything at once: sorrow and joy and regret and hope and wistfulness. . . . It was, *Mom says my dad was a bad person and but he's still my father and but now he's dead and I'll never meet him; he'll never get a chance to change*. It was also, *Now he's dead*

and Mom never has to worry about him anymore, and neither do I. Colin felt like he was falling apart and being put back together all at once. Maybe he was crying, too, and even he couldn't have said if they were happy tears or sad ones.

He looked down and saw that Nevaeh was clutching his hand now.

Colin held on tight, too.

"Whatever else you can say about Colin's dad," Prilla continued, "you can't ignore the fact that Colin wouldn't exist if it weren't for his dad. If you wanted to hear about DNA, you should have asked Roddy to give this speech, not me. And, hey, I'm a teenager, so I never want to give parents too much credit for what their kids accomplish. Especially not a parent who wasn't there for his kid. But I choose to look at Mr. Creedmont's death this way: Colin is something good—someone good—that lives on. Because Colin exists. Because Colin *is* a good person. Every time Colin is a good friend to those of us around him, that's a good thing living on. Every time he actually laughs at one of Deepak's, Derek's, or Daryl's stupid jokes and makes them feel good about themselves, that's a good thing living on."

Dimly, Colin heard one of the three Ds—or maybe all of them at once—protest, "Hey, wait a minute!" and "I resent that! Our jokes aren't stupid!" But Prilla kept talking.

"Every time Colin is a good, loyal son to his mother, that's a good thing living on. Every time he helps clean out a house for some pathetic old person who thought it was a good idea to keep every grocery store receipt they ever got, that's a good thing living on. Every time he takes a beautiful picture of something that all the rest of us just walked past and ignored—and wouldn't have even *seen* without him—that's a good thing living on. Every time he does all the amazing things he's going to do in the rest of his life—which *he* is going to be eulogized for someday, maybe about ninety years from now—that's a good thing living on. It *is* possible for a bad father to have a good son. And, Colin, that's what you are. I am sorry for your loss. I am sorry for everything it represents to you. But you are going to be okay. I pray to God that my words can comfort you and that you find peace."

Colin was completely sobbing now. He lifted his hand to wipe his eyes, and he'd forgotten that he was still holding Nevaeh's hand. But she didn't

let go, and neither did he. She let him wipe away his tears with his own hand and hers, too.

Then Colin felt other hands patting his shoulders. He'd forgotten that Deepak, Daryl, and Derek were behind him, but they were like Nevaeh, trying to comfort him, too.

"Little dude, we're supposed to walk up to the front to sing a song for you right now, but this is starting to feel like we're doing a laying on of hands, so maybe we'll just sing standing right here," Daryl said.

"Also, that means you don't have to look at us and we don't have to look at you as we sing, so if you want to wince when Derek hits a sour note or two, that's fine," Deepak added.

"There won't be any sour notes!" Derek protested.

One of them hummed, as if to set the key, and then they all began to sing:

*One life ends, but yours goes on
And that's the way of life.
And you can be sad
But you don't have to stay sad . . .*

Nevaeh leaned over and whispered in Colin's ear, "They wrote that song themselves. Just for you."

Colin was no music expert, but he could kind of tell that this wasn't a professional song. Someone—Derek?—did hit a sour note or two. And they seemed to be very carefully avoiding saying anything about how much Colin must have loved his dad, or about how Colin would always remember him.

But they wrote a song for me, Colin thought. For me!

Over the course of the summer, Deepak, Daryl, and Derek had started to feel like unofficial big brothers to Colin. Except he'd also seen how Nevaeh and her brothers treated each other.

Maybe Deepak, Daryl, and Derek were even better than big brothers.

As if they'd planned it, each of the boys gave Colin's shoulders an extra squeeze just as they finished the last note of the song.

The room was completely silent for a moment, then Ben stood and walked to the podium.

“This ends the service in memory of Colin’s father,” he said. “Please stay for light refreshments afterward, to be served in the hall.”

Nevaeh let go of Colin’s hand but leaned in close again.

“We could have added extra scripture or songs, but Ree and Ben said people get all antsy if services go on too long,” she said. “I think that might have been a record, though, that we were done in less than fifteen minutes. But . . . did that help? Did we make you feel better? Or . . . worse?”

She sounded so worried for him. But it wasn’t the same as when his mom sounded worried for him—when Mom’s fretting made Colin feel like there might be something wrong with him. Mom’s worry was heavy, a weight on Colin’s shoulders.

Nevaeh’s questions—and the way she peered at him so wonderingly, her eyebrows squinched together, her brown eyes hopeful—made him feel lighter. Lifted up. He could still feel the imprint of Deepak’s, Daryl’s, and Derek’s hands on his shoulders, and maybe he always would. Maybe it would be like carrying around a ghost of memory the rest of his life—a good ghost.

But probably the only thing Nevaeh could see was that he still had tears streaming down his face.

He wiped them away one last time.

“You made me feel better,” he said. “So much better.”

Grandma Hal's Secret

The “light refreshments” were boxes and boxes of pizza. Nevaeh was relieved that even that portion of her plan had gone perfectly. Dalton’s on-again, off-again girlfriend, Sadie, had worked at Donato’s when she was in high school, and she still knew everyone there. So she’d managed to arrange for the pizza to be delivered right at the end of the service. By the time everyone spilled out into the hall, Sadie had the boxes lined up on a folding table and was offering people cups of Pepsi and Diet Coke and Sprite and water.

Nevaeh went over and elbowed Dalton. She was about to say, “Thanks for not being a jerk and getting into a stupid fight with Sadie this afternoon that would have messed up the pizza plans.” But she thought better of it and said only, “I’m glad I got to know Sadie because of you.”

And Dalton, who normally would have had a snarky comeback, just said, “Yeah. She’s pretty great, isn’t she?” And then he went over to help.

Nevaeh stood back and watched how everyone went from solemnly hugging Colin and offering condolences to just being a bunch of ordinary kids and teens eating pizza. Even Colin himself started laughing when he took a bite of pizza and the string of cheese stretched all the way down his chin. Nevaeh saw Ree’s older brother, Ben, go over and hesitantly tell Deepak, Daryl, and Derek, “You know, I sing, too . . .” and Derek said, “Great! Want to try out for our band? If you take my place on the vocals, I can go back to just playing guitar.”

Meanwhile, Ree’s sister, Melanie, was talking to Axel’s fiancée, who was a teacher. Melanie was saying, “Yes, I’m going into third grade—wait, you mean I could be in your class?”

She squealed and began jumping up and down.

Nevaeh wanted to slip over to Colin and tell him, *Hey, it looks like we really are good ambassadors for the schools, after all! It wasn't just a cover story!* But Colin had moved on to having some sort of contest with Roddy and Prilla to see how far they could get pizza cheese to stretch. Roddy was using terms like “tensile strength,” and Nevaeh wanted no part of that.

So Nevaeh walked over to Ree instead. Ree was standing near the alcove by the grand staircase, very close to the couch where Nevaeh, Colin, and Ree had talked a few nights earlier.

“You were right about needing food,” Nevaeh said. “How did you know this would happen?”

She gestured toward the crowd just as a strand of cheese sprang back and hit Roddy in the nose, and everyone laughed. The laughter sounded like releasing tension, like springing back from being too serious.

“I’ve been around funerals and memorial services my whole life, remember?” Ree said. “Grandma Hal always says, ‘After a funeral, everyone needs to be reminded they still know how to be alive. And that means eating and laughing.’ Or, well, you know. She used to say that.”

A familiar sadness crept over Ree’s face, and Nevaeh wanted so badly to cheer her up.

“I get it now,” Nevaeh said. “I didn’t understand before why your family would want to run a funeral home. I didn’t understand why anyone would go to a funeral unless their parents made them. Thanks for helping me with this.” She rubbed her collarbone, where the lace on her shirt was most itchy. “But I still don’t get why people dress up. I think I’m going to write this in my will: ‘Everybody has to wear comfortable clothes to my funeral! Come in your jammies, if you want to!’ You know. When I get old enough to have a will.”

Ree laughed.

“Yeah, I’m so sick of this dress,” she said. “All my summer ones are still at my grandparents’ house—my dad’s parents, I mean. When I faked the email from my mom saying I was going to camp, I told them I would be back for the last two weeks of the summer with them. So I left clothes there. I don’t want to miss out on seeing those grandparents, either, you know?”

Nevaeh suddenly felt very grateful that all of her family was right there in Groveview. Practically everyone she knew lived in Groveview or

right on the outskirts.

“Do you think—” she began.

But just then, she heard footsteps on the stairway beside them.

“I—I thought you said all the grown-ups were away,” she stammered.

That isn’t the ghost, she told herself. *I still don’t believe in ghosts!*

“I said everyone was away but Grandma Hal,” Ree corrected. “But I thought she was sound asleep. . . .”

Ree spun toward the bottom of the stairs and called up, “Sorry, Grandma. Were we too loud? Did we wake you? Do you need me to help you back into bed?”

“You were having an old-fashioned wake, and you didn’t invite me?” Ree’s grandmother responded. Her voice sounded less shaky and uncertain than before; she could have been anybody’s grandmother. But then she got down to the bottom step and turned, and her hair was oddly mashed together on one side and too fluffed out on the other. She was wearing a robe along with a necklace that looked like it was made out of diamonds.

“A wake’s another type of funeral,” Ree whispered to Nevaeh. “Usually one that’s really rowdy.” Ree went over and patted down her grandmother’s hair where it stood up, then said, “Not really a wake, Grandma. We’re just letting some people eat here after a funeral. Well, kind of a funeral.”

“Who’s the next of kin?” Grandma Hal asked, her sharp eyes searching the crowd.

“That boy over there.” Ree pointed at Colin, who now had pizza sauce on his face. “His dad died. But—”

“You know they always send me to talk to children who have lost a parent,” Grandma Hal said. “You know that’s my job.”

Now she sounded like she was scolding Ree, like maybe Ree was nothing to her but an employee who’d messed up. Who wasn’t taking care of Colin the way she should.

“Look, he’s smiling now. He’s fine,” Ree said, putting her hand on her grandmother’s arm, as if she was trying to hold her back. “Do you want some pizza? Maybe if you go put on some shoes first, you can come back and . . .”

Nevaeh saw that Grandma Hal’s feet were bare.

“It’s the ones who leave funerals pretending to smile that I worry about the most,” Grandma Hal snapped, jerking her arm back. She glared at

Nevaeh, too, as if she thought Nevaeh was also a disobedient employee. But then Grandma Hal's eyes sprang wide open. Her eyebrows lifted toward her hairline. Awe crept over her face. "Gloria! Is that you? It is! My good friend Gloria!"

Grandma Hal threw her arms around Nevaeh, like Nevaeh was a long-lost friend she hadn't seen in years.

As soon as she decently could, Nevaeh pulled back from the hug.

"No, um, sorry. My name's Nevaeh, not Gloria," Nevaeh said. "We met last weekend. Nevaeh Greevey, remember?"

Grandma Hal all but rolled her eyes.

"Gloria Greevey, of course I remember your last name!" she exclaimed. "You and me and Lois Taggart, we've been friends since we were all in diapers. You're Gloria, and that's Lo—" She turned toward Ree. For an instant, she looked baffled, then her face cleared. "Oh, I didn't realize I was standing by a mirror." She pointed to Ree. "That's *me*. But Lois must be around here somewhere. This is her house we're standing in, you know."

Ree slid to the side and mouthed, "Just play along."

"Oh, uh, right," Nevaeh said. "It's nice to see you again, uh—Halcyon?"

Grandma Hal dug her elbow into Nevaeh's side like Nevaeh had just told a great joke.

"You know nobody calls me Halcyon but the teachers at school," she said. And somehow her voice sounded girlish now, as if she were as young as Nevaeh. "You always were a kidder, Gloria."

Gloria, Nevaeh thought. *Gloria Greevey . . .*

Had that been a real person Grandma Hal knew as a kid, or was she just making stuff up? Nevaeh didn't know how dementia worked. But she thought about the old people who were regulars at the annual Greevey family reunions—were any of them named Gloria? A great-aunt, maybe? A second or third cousin twice removed?

Nevaeh didn't usually pay much attention to the old people at family reunions beyond her own grandparents. She was usually too busy hanging out with the other kids.

Grandma Hal peered around suspiciously, then leaned closer to Nevaeh, as if she needed to whisper.

“You’ve kept the secret, haven’t you, Gloria?” Grandma Hal asked. “You and Lois and me, we vowed we would never tell.”

“Tell what?” Nevaeh asked. “What secret?”

Grandma Hal gasped, and she put her hand to her mouth. Distress and confusion swam across her face. Then, suddenly, she giggled.

“There you go again, Gloria, teasing like always,” Grandma Hal said. “I know you haven’t forgotten the secret. You can’t fool me.”

Something reckless crept into Nevaeh.

“You mean the secret about the boy,” Nevaeh said. “The boy in the pictures. Or—the boys.”

And then she held her breath.

Grandma Hal peered deep into Nevaeh’s eyes. The old lady’s face trembled; it seemed like whatever grip she still had on her memories could fail completely at any moment. But then she set her jaw. She looked clear-eyed again, fully in command of her faculties.

“Of course I mean the secret about the boys,” she said. Then she grinned, looking somehow resolute and mischievous all at once. “You know what we all promised. We’ll carry that secret to our graves if we have to.” She gave Nevaeh a playful shove. “Graves, get it?”

Was Grandma Hal hinting at some secret about Russell’s and Warren’s grave sites? Something beyond the fact that they didn’t have any tombstones marking where they were buried?

Nevaeh wanted to say, *No! I don’t get it! Because—can’t you see?—I’m not actually Gloria Greevey. You didn’t know me when I was a kid! I’m only twelve and you’re, like, in your eighties. Can’t you just tell me about the ghost boy—or ghost boys—without any riddles or jokes? Or secrets? Can’t you just explain?*

But before she could open her mouth, she heard a door slam at the back of the house. A door slamming hard, as if whoever had shoved it was furious.

And then, a second later, Ree’s mother and stepfather appeared in the doorway at the opposite end of the hallway, coming from the kitchen. Every other time Nevaeh had seen either of them, they’d looked and acted so mild-mannered, so patient, so kind.

Not now.

“What is this?” Ree’s stepfather shouted. “What’s going on here?”

Instinctively, Nevaeh stepped over in front of Ree, doing her best to hide her. Nevaeh felt a breeze behind her, as if Ree had rushed away and dashed up the stairs.

But what if they'd both moved too slowly?

What if Ree's parents had already seen her?

The Misunderstanding

Colin had just taken a big bite of pizza when the screaming began. He heard “What is this? What’s going on?” and then “Benjamin Michael Rhodes, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“I—” Ben began, freezing with his own slice of pizza halfway to his mouth.

“We were out at a graveside service, and you decide that’s a good time to throw a wild party?” Mr. Rhodes continued.

“When we trusted you to babysit Melanie and watch out for Grandma Hal?” This came from the woman beside Mr. Rhodes, who had to be Ree’s mother. She had the same heart-shaped face, the same straight, dark hair. She didn’t sound as angry as Mr. Rhodes, just disappointed.

That’s how mothers make you feel terrible, Colin thought. He’d always wondered what it would feel like to be yelled at by a father instead. By his own father.

Now he would never know.

But, really, who wanted to daydream about being yelled at?

Across the hall, Melanie was striding toward her parents, waving her arms like she was trying to distract them from scolding Ben.

“I’m right here,” she said. “I’m fine. Ben’s making sure I get a good dinner, see?” She held up her own paper plate. “And Grandma Hal’s fine, too. She’s upstairs asleep.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Colin saw Nevaeh rushing toward him from over by the grand staircase at the front of the house. She was behaving oddly, keeping her arms outstretched, pulling Prilla and Roddy and Colin into a tight cluster with no gaps between them, crowding them toward Ree’s parents.

Oh, right, Colin thought. Nevaeh was standing over there with Ree. She's giving Ree a way to escape up the stairs without being seen.

Covertly, he peeked back over his shoulder. Ree was gone. The space by the stairs was empty. Nevaeh was going to make Ree's parents even more suspicious if she didn't chill out.

But Colin couldn't catch Nevaeh's eye to tell her that.

"That's right—everybody here is fine," Nevaeh was practically shouting. "But this isn't a wild party. Ben and Melanie and . . . I mean, both your kids were just helping a friend."

Colin heard the way she almost slipped and said Ree's name, too. But would Ree's mom and stepdad notice?

He could see them peering around, their frowns getting deeper and deeper. Maybe this did look like a wild party. Someone had haphazardly stacked empty pizza boxes on top of the heavy wood chests that lined the hallway. White paper plates spilled out of the trash can someone had dragged from the kitchen. And too many kids and teenagers were crowded together in the hallway. Ree's parents probably couldn't tell that Dalton and Axel Greevey and their girlfriends were actually adults.

Everybody started talking at once. Ben protested, "Dad, just calm down and listen!" Deepak, Daryl, and Derek kept saying, "Really, Ben's a good dude!" And all the Greeveys kept getting louder and louder and louder.

Colin swallowed the lump of pizza in his mouth. Then he tilted back his head and screamed, "Everybody, be quiet!"

Colin *never* acted like that. He was pretty sure that was the only reason everyone was shocked into silence.

Then more than a dozen pairs of eyes stared at him, and it was so tempting to meekly say, *Oh, sorry, never mind.*

But Colin couldn't just stand there anymore.

"*I'm* the one who needs to explain," he said.

It was Mr. Rhodes he looked at, not Ree's mom or anyone else. Everything had changed. Maybe Colin could be okay about talking with other kids' dads now.

Mr. Rhodes's expression softened a little, gazing at Colin. Maybe Colin still looked like he'd been crying.

"With all due respect," Mr. Rhodes said, "this is a family matter, between me and my wife and our son." He swept his gaze around the

room, his face just as stern and fierce as before. “It doesn’t appear that anything is broken or vandalized, so the rest of you can leave.”

“But that’s not fair,” Colin said. “I can’t just leave and let Ben get in trouble for doing something good. He was helping *me*. Because my father died.”

The words came out more easily than he would have expected. Even though he was talking to a stranger.

Even though he was talking to another boy’s dad.

“Oh, honey,” Ree’s mom said, and that was exactly like something Colin’s mom might have said. It sounded like she might be only moments away from crouching down and pulling him into a hug. But Colin didn’t want that right now.

“It’s not like you think,” Colin said. “I never knew my dad. It’s not like I miss him now because he was never there to begin with. But . . . there was a hole, and the hole got bigger when I heard he was dead. And my mother said I couldn’t go to the funeral. So my friend Nevaeh wanted to help.”

“All your friends,” Ben interrupted. “All of us wanted to help.”

Colin glanced over in surprise—was even Ben willing to call himself Colin’s friend now? Even though Colin had only met him last weekend; even though it was because of Colin that Ben was in trouble now?

Ben was across the crowd from Colin, so Colin’s glance skated across pretty much every face in the room.

Wish I could take a picture of this, Colin thought. Because *everyone* was gazing back at him as though they were his friends. He wasn’t just someone they knew because of Nevaeh. Or just someone whose mother had hired them for summer work. A friend.

And they weren’t just looking at him like they felt sorry for him because of his dad. It was more like they were proud of him, like they thought he was doing a good job explaining.

Maybe I don’t need a picture, he thought. *Maybe it’s better just to have this as a memory . . .*

Colin was quiet for too long, thinking that. Nevaeh took over the story.

“So Ben and Melanie, they let us have a memorial service for Colin’s dad,” she said. “Or not really for his dad. For that hole he was talking about. So it would shrink.”

Was that what happened? Colin wondered. *Is that why I feel better?*

Or was it just because the hole was balanced now—with the fullness of knowing that other people loved him?

“I think . . . I think they’re all telling the truth,” Ree’s mom murmured. “Ben, Melanie, I didn’t even realize you knew kids here yet. And you’re already being so kind?”

She stepped forward and drew both of her stepchildren into a hug. After a moment, Mr. Rhodes joined them.

But he was still muttering, “You should have asked first. You should have warned us.”

“No harm done,” Ree’s mom whispered back as she wrapped her arms around Mr. Rhodes, too.

The Lane-Rhodes family looked to be completely in sync now, completely at peace.

But they *weren’t* complete.

Ree should be part of that hug, too, Colin thought. *That’s something else she’s missing out on this summer.*

But it wasn’t his place to tell on her. That would just make things worse.

Around him, everybody started talking again. But it was in a good way, happy chatter, not defensive explanations. It felt like the “wild party” had absorbed Ree’s parents, too. Melanie tugged her dad over toward the lineup of pizza boxes, and he loaded up a plate, too.

He held it out to his wife, but she shook her head.

“I’m going to go check on Grandma Hal first,” she said. “Maybe I can convince her to come down and join the fun.”

Nevaeh leaned close to whisper in Colin’s ear, “Grandma Hal was just down here a few minutes ago with Ree. Ree must have taken her back up when she went to hide. We need to keep Mrs. Lane down here a little longer, to give Ree more time to get her grandma settled.”

She tugged Colin over toward Ree’s mom. The two of them planted themselves in front of her, blocking her path through the crowd and trapping her against a wall.

“Mrs. Lane, the furniture in this house is so cool!” Nevaeh gushed. “Colin here is a photographer, and there are, like, at least a hundred things here he wants to take a picture of.”

“Oh, um, that’s nice,” Ree’s mom said. “Maybe we can arrange that sometime. Or, really, you’re welcome to take pictures now.”

“It’s too late in the day,” Colin said. “Natural light is best, and it’s too close to dusk now for that.”

Nevaeh beamed at him, as if expecting him to go on talking about photography and lighting for at least another fifteen or twenty minutes.

But Ree’s mom was already pushing past them, even as she apologized, “I’d be happy to talk to you about this later, but right now I really have to go see how my mom is doing.”

Short of tackling her, Colin couldn’t think of any way to hold her back.

“Ugh,” Nevaeh muttered beside him, as soon as Ree’s mom was out of earshot. “We only bought Ree another minute or two—hope that’s enough.”

Helplessly both of them drifted toward the bottom of the grand staircase, listening. Ree’s mom disappeared up the stairs.

“No screams yet,” Colin whispered.

They could hear Ree’s mom calling softly, “Mom? Do you want to wake up and come downstairs to eat? Or do you want me to bring your dinner up here? How does pizza sound?”

Then they heard, a little louder, “Mom? Are you in the bathroom?” And louder still, “Mom?”

And then Ree’s mom was standing right at the top of the stairs above them, totally screaming, “Quick! Somebody call nine-one-one! My mother’s gone missing!”

What You Have to Be Afraid Of

“No, no, that’s—” Nevaeh called up the stairs to Ree’s mom. She meant to finish the sentence with something like *that’s not what happened*. Ree’s grandmother had been standing right beside Nevaeh only five minutes ago. Maybe ten. Or fifteen. She couldn’t have *vanished*.

But how could she get Ree’s mom to calm down without snitching on Ree?

“Do you think the grandmother’s hiding with Ree?” Colin whispered beside her. “Will we have to tell on Ree? Will this make them *find* Ree?”

“Would that be a good thing or a bad thing right now?” Nevaeh asked.

“Even if they’re up in the attic together, I bet Ree can hear her mom screaming,” Colin said. He was usually more of a worrier than Nevaeh, but he sounded very sure of himself now. “She’ll send her grandmother back down those stairs. And even if the grandma says, ‘I was up there with my granddaughter, Ree, no one will believe her.’ So Ree will be fine.”

Nevaeh didn’t think it would look too weird if she climbed the stairs toward Ree’s mom.

But she got to a level where she could see down the second-story hallway, and the attic door *wasn’t* springing open. Grandma Hal was nowhere in sight.

Neither was Ree.

Mr. Rhodes and Ben sprinted past Nevaeh on the stairs, with Mr. Rhodes calling out, “She’s got to be here somewhere. There are a dozen people downstairs. Somebody would have seen her if she left.”

Ben was assuring his stepmom, “Grandma Hal really was fine the last time we checked on her. . . . She was snoring!”

Nevaeh gulped.

“Could she be up in your attic?” she asked faintly.

“We keep that door locked,” Ree’s mom snapped. “Grandma Hal doesn’t have a key.”

But Ree must, Nevaeh thought. Ree might have left that door open or unlocked when she ran back up here. . . .

Others were calling up to Ree’s mom now and rushing toward her. Nevaeh pulled out her phone and dipped her head down to text Ree.

There was already a text from Ree on the screen of Nevaeh’s phone that Nevaeh had missed: **What’s with all the shouting down there? What’s going on? I can’t make out what Mom’s saying, but she sounds upset.**

The text had gone out to Nevaeh and Colin and two unknown numbers that Nevaeh guessed probably belonged to Ben and Melanie. Nevaeh quickly wrote back: **Your mom can’t find your grandma. She’s up in the attic with you, right? MAKE HER COME BACK DOWN!**

Ree’s reply was quick: **No, she’s not with me.**

Nevaeh typed fast: **Is she somewhere else in the attic? Can you look around?**

She couldn’t be, Ree wrote back. **The door’s locked. I locked it myself. When Grandma Hal was still standing downstairs with you.**

No, no, no, no, no . . . , Nevaeh thought.

She saw Colin with his head bent down over his phone. She could pinpoint the exact moment he must have read Ree’s last line. He winced and gritted his teeth. And then he raised his head and called up to Ree’s mother, “Maybe your mother just stepped outside for a few minutes to take a walk or something? I mean, maybe our little, uh, party was getting kind of loud—sorry about that—and we were bothering her, so . . .”

He sounded so innocent saying that. Maybe he was an even better actor than Prilla.

But Ree’s mother completely snapped at him.

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of,” she all but snarled. “My mother has dementia. Sometimes dementia patients start wandering. Sometimes they get lost. Sometimes they die before anyone finds them. . . .”

She was almost wailing now. Everybody from downstairs had crowded upstairs now. Prilla was shouting, “We’ll form search parties—she couldn’t have gotten far,” and Deepak was saying, “I called the police, just like you wanted.” And Dalton, of all people, was huddled beside Ree’s

mother alongside Ben and Melanie, and all three of them were patting her shoulders and telling her, “Someone will find her. We’re sure.”

Mr. Rhodes moved past his kids and Dalton and put his arms around his wife.

“There’s still a chance she’s somewhere in this house,” he said. “We’ll look *everywhere*. There’s no reason to assume the worst. After all, she’s never wandered off before.”

Nevaeh felt sick to her stomach. She remembered the burst of air she’d felt on her bare legs, right after she’d turned away from Ree and Grandma Hal. Maybe the rush of air hadn’t been from Ree scrambling away so fast. It’d been too intense. Maybe it had been from Grandma Hal opening the front door and slipping out.

No—that’s probably what it was, Nevaeh thought. *Almost certainly.*

She had to tell.

“I saw—” she began.

But just then, there was movement down the second-story hallway. The attic door was opening.

Nevaeh pushed herself the rest of the way up the stairs to see what was happening. It was probably her motion that made everyone else turn toward the attic door, too. Or maybe the people closest to it could hear the door creak.

But then the door was open, and Ree was standing right in the middle of the hall, in full view of everyone.

“That’s not true,” Ree said. Her eyes flooded with tears. Her chin trembled. “It’s not true that Grandma Hal never wandered off. It’s just that I always found her. I always managed to stop her.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Until now.”

The Truth about Ree

“Mom, Harvey—don’t be mad at me,” Ree said. She seemed to be blinking back tears. “I’ve been hiding here all summer. I came back from Grandma and Grandpa Lane’s. Because I had to take care of Grandma Hal.”

Colin was behind Ree’s mom and Mr. Rhodes, so he couldn’t see their faces. But he saw Ree’s mom race toward her daughter.

And then she was wrapping her arms around Ree’s shoulders.

“Oh, honey,” Ree’s mom said. “That’s not your job, to take care of Grandma Hal. You’re twelve. It’s too much for you.”

“But you always said if Grandma started wandering, we’d have to send her away to some kind of memory care facility,” Ree wailed. “I couldn’t let that happen!”

Colin was so busy watching Ree and her mom, he didn’t notice that Nevaeh had circled back to him until she dug her elbow into his side.

“Did Ree lie to us?” Nevaeh whispered in her ear. “She didn’t tell us anything about keeping her grandma from wandering off. She said she was hiding here because she didn’t want to miss out on the last moments of her grandmother remembering her. . . .”

“Maybe it was both reasons,” Colin said distantly. He was thinking, *If I had a grandmother, too, instead of just a mom, I would have been like Ree. I would have done anything to keep that grandma near. . . .*

But he was making that mistake again of thinking someone else’s life was so similar to his. Ree didn’t just have a mom and grandmother. She had a stepfather now, too. She had Ben and Melanie.

“What a mess,” Nevaeh said. “I didn’t tell everyone to keep Ree a secret—I could have been the reason Ree’s secret ended. And I didn’t

know I was supposed to keep Ree's grandma from going out the door. Why didn't Ree at least tell us that? So we could *help* her protect her grandma?"

"She probably didn't want to talk about it," Colin said. "We were strangers."

"Not *now*," Nevaeh said.

Nevaeh doesn't get it, Colin thought. Because she's the type who makes friends in five minutes flat. And . . . the type who doesn't have any secrets that hurt.

"People are going to find Ree's grandma," Colin said. "It's going to be fine."

Around them, Deepak and Prilla and Mr. Rhodes and Ben were working together to send out pairs of searchers. Colin could hear shouted directions: "You go west. . . ." "You go east. . . ." "You go down the alleyway. . . ." "I'll search the basement. . . ."

"We'll be a search team, too," Nevaeh spoke up. "Colin and me."

"I'll go with them," Ree said.

Colin jerked his head up in surprise. He'd kind of expected Ree and her mom to stand there hugging for a lot longer. Maybe Ree's mom had expected the same thing because she protested, "Ree, how can I trust you out there? When I just found out you've been lying to me all summer? Sending me fake texts and—wait, did you hack into your grandparents' email accounts, too? And—"

"Mom, I did all that to help Grandma Hal," Ree countered. "How can I *not* try to find her now? When it's my fault she's missing? Plus, it's not like I'm going to run away or anything. I'm the kid who ran away back *home*."

Ree's mom let go.

"We'll talk about all this after your grandmother's safe again . . .," she murmured.

Ree came rushing toward Colin and Nevaeh. She all but shoved them back down the stairs.

"Wait, don't we have to get our search-party assignment?" Colin asked.

"We're going east," Ree called back over her shoulder, just as Nevaeh said, "Put us down for going east, and then turning south out by Route Four."

Ree and Nevaeh looked at each other in surprise.

“Did you two plan that?” Colin asked as the three of them scrambled down the stairs. “Did you send a text to each other that I didn’t see?”

“No—I just thought we should look in the neighborhood where Grandma Hal lived when she was a little girl,” Ree said. “After I ran and hid, did Grandma Hal say anything about how she used to live at 104 Pine Street when she was a kid? Is that what you’re thinking?”

“No.” Nevaeh shook her head in a stubborn way Colin knew very well. “No, that’s not where we should go. I was thinking we should search the cemetery. Because your grandma was talking about Russell and Warren Null’s graves right before she must have walked out the door.”

Colin punched 104 Pine Street into Google Maps on his phone. He held it up so the other two could see the spidery streets of the eastern edge of Groveview.

“Either way, we’re going in the same direction,” he said. “Looks like your grandmother used to live right beside the cemetery.”

Nevaeh snatched the phone out of his hand. She zoomed in even closer on the cemetery and Pine Street.

“Not just that,” she said. “Look where your grandmother’s old backyard is. Look at what it faces.”

“You mean, besides the cemetery?” Colin asked. “Isn’t that bad enough?”

“I mean the mausoleum,” Nevaeh said. “The mausoleum that’s right beside where the two ghost boys are buried.”

She bit her lip.

“Or should I say . . . where they’re supposed to be buried?”

At the Cemetery

It was already getting dark when Nevaeh, Colin, and Ree stepped out the front door of the funeral home.

And I'm the one who said we had to go to the cemetery? Nevaeh thought ruefully. *Brilliant. Just brilliant.*

Heading east down Main Street meant that the last rays of the sunset were glowing behind them, while the sky in front of them got darker and darker.

Nevaeh kept lifting her phone to check for texts from some other team saying, **We found her! Grandma Hal is fine and we're bringing her home right now.**

But the only texts that flooded in were ones like **She's not in the alley. We looked behind garbage cans and knocked on back doors and everything.** And **She's not anywhere around the courthouse.**

Nevaeh sent a private text to her mom and dad: **Can you two help with a search party for an old lady with dementia who's missing somewhere in Groveview? Prilla can tell you where to look.**

The text came back from her mom immediately: **We're driving in now.**

Then Nevaeh texted Mrs. Torres, the woman she and Colin babysat for sometimes: **If you are taking the twins out for a walk in their stroller now, can you watch for an old lady who has dementia and might be wandering around in a light blue robe?**

Nevaeh hesitated for a moment, and then she called up a texting group she hadn't added anything to since the end of the school year. It was all her old so-called friends from sixth grade, the ones she wasn't actually sure *were* her friends anymore. She took a deep breath and wrote, **A new friend**

I just met has a grandmother with dementia, and that grandma's gone missing. Can you get your parents to drive you around your neighborhood right now, to see if you can find an old lady wandering around in a robe?

Cecily and Ava, the two who were *always* on their phones, texted back right away: **Sure** and **Taking our dog out for a walk right now. We'll watch for her.**

And then they started texting things like **How are you?** and **What else is up?** and **Where have you been all summer?**

Was it possible that the past few weeks when Nevaeh was feeling bad that her friends never contacted her, they were feeling bad that she never contacted them?

Nevaeh couldn't deal with that right now. She texted back: **Thanks. I'll tell you everything later. I'm out searching in the dark right now.**

And then she put her phone away.

She realized that Colin and Ree were doing nothing but staring at their phones, too.

"Hey," she said. "I know Daryl and Derek said they already searched this block, but maybe we'll see something they missed. We should look around more."

"Are you going to tell me how to search for my own grandmother?" Ree snapped, even as she lowered her phone. "Just like you two told me I should confess everything to my parents? And you're probably thinking that if I'd just done that, Grandma Hal wouldn't be missing right now?"

"That's not what I was thinking," Colin said.

"Me neither," Nevaeh said.

Ree balled up her fists and pressed them hard against her eyes.

Nevaeh resisted saying, *You're not going to find your grandma by hiding your eyes.* Because that wouldn't help, either.

And Ree was probably peeking. It was just hard to tell in the near-dark.

For a while, the three kids trudged along without talking, except for Ree calling out every now and then, "Grandma? Grandma Hal? Where are you?" Colin darted off the sidewalk once to look behind a row of tall cedar trees. Nevaeh turned on the flashlight on her phone to shine it over the edge of a white picket fence. This threw eerie shadows everywhere.

"It's not like she's a missing *dog*," Ree snapped. "She wouldn't be hiding. Not when she hears me calling."

“But what if—” Nevaeh began. She decided not to finish the sentence: *What if she’s hurt and blacked out?* Or, even worse, *What if she’s dead?* Instead, she muttered, “You could have told us the truth from the very beginning. Then I would have known not to let your grandma out of my sight when she was standing by that door. I feel like you think this is my fault. But I didn’t know! I thought we were just worried about fake ghosts and boys from a hundred years ago!”

“I couldn’t even tell the truth to Mom and Harvey,” Ree retorted. She bent her head down, as if she could only search the sidewalk in front of her. “Or Ben and Melanie. Not the whole truth. Great—now I’ve gotten Ben and Melanie in big trouble, too. . . .” She glanced back at her phone screen, its tiny rectangle of light throwing a glow across Ree’s anguished face. “How could it be that no one’s found Grandma yet?”

“Because we’re going to be the ones who do that,” Nevaeh said. “Because we’re the ones who know where she went.”

But she noticed that neither Ree nor Colin said, *Okay, since we’re so sure, how about if we get one of the teenagers or grown-ups to drive us there? So we can find Grandma Hal faster?*

They kept walking. After a moment, Colin said in a small voice, “Did you ever really even care about the ghost boys, Ree? Or was that just something you pretended to be worried about, to get Ben and Melanie to help you? And . . . us?”

“I cared about that!” Ree protested. “Because Grandma was *always* talking about the ghost boy. She would get so upset.”

“I looked up dementia online,” Colin said. “Sometimes people who have that . . . sometimes they see things that aren’t there. So all this talk about ghosts . . .”

“We have pictures of those boys,” Ree said, and now it sounded like she was pleading for Colin and Nevaeh to see things her way. To believe in ghosts. “And, sure, sometimes pictures can be faked. And Grandma Hal wasn’t alive yet in 1930 when those pictures were taken, but she must have seen those pictures later on, when she was still a kid and she was hanging out at the funeral home with her friend Lois. There’s *something* that Grandma Hal keeps trying to tell me about the boy in the picture. Or the boys. It’s, like, the thing she gets most upset about forgetting . . . even more upset about than forgetting about me. . . .”

She sniffled.

Nevaeh wrapped an arm around Ree's shoulders. But she couldn't think of anything comforting to say except, "Hey. Hey. Someone will find her. . . ."

And then they were at the cemetery.

Away from the streetlights they'd been passing all along—and with the glow of the Walmart and other strip-mall stores farther ahead—the cemetery itself looked like a pool of darkness.

"Maybe we should look at her old house first," Colin said, practically in a whisper.

They veered off to the side, down Pine Street. This was a quiet neighborhood of big old houses, all with multiple stories and rambling front porches and, in a few cases, even a turret or two. When they rang the bell at 104 Pine Street and explained about Ree's grandmother, the young woman who came to the door took down Nevaeh's phone number and even promised to put out an alert on the neighborhood Facebook page.

"Do you mind if we look in your backyard?" Ree asked.

"And climb over your back fence to get into the cemetery?" Nevaeh added.

"As long as you don't let my kids see you," the woman said. "They know *they're* not allowed to do that."

The backyard was cluttered with a sandbox and a wooden climbing structure and a lineup of Little Tikes cars that glowed eerily in the light from Nevaeh's phone flashlight.

But there was no sign of Ree's grandmother.

"Nobody's watching us, right?" Nevaeh asked, putting the toe of her sandal against the lowest slat of the fence.

"We're in the dark," Colin retorted as he joined Nevaeh on the fence. "How could anyone see us, anyhow?"

He sounds scared, Nevaeh thought.

"We're acting like thieves," Ree whispered. "Like grave robbers."

"What would people even want to steal from a cemetery?" Colin asked. He dropped to the ground, and Nevaeh saw his phone screen glow to life. Was he going to light the path so Nevaeh and Ree could see where they might land?

No, he was looking up grave robbers.

"They would steal jewelry from the corpses?" he asked, sounding horrified. "Or the bodies themselves sometimes?"

“Could we talk about something else?” Nevaeh suggested, hitting the ground a little too hard herself.

Neither Ree nor Colin answered. Because what other topics were better? Ree’s missing grandmother? Colin’s dead father? The eerie feeling Nevaeh had gotten in Ree’s attic? The way Ree’s grandmother had been so convinced that Nevaeh had also seen a ghost boy?

Ree hit the ground beside Nevaeh.

“Is that the mausoleum you were talking about?” she asked, pointing toward an extra-dark structure directly ahead.

“Yeah . . . ,” Nevaeh said.

She led the other two around to the back of the mausoleum, to the blank, open space where the cemetery map had claimed that Russell and Warren Null were buried.

Ree’s grandmother wasn’t there, either. Nevaeh, Colin, and Ree looked under a nearby tree. They started looking around and behind nearby tombstones. But after just two or three, Ree moaned, “This is pointless! There are probably hundreds of gravestones in this cemetery. Grandma Hal could be anywhere! Or not here at all!”

“But she was talking about graves right before she walked out the door,” Nevaeh insisted. “She was hinting about a secret about ‘the boys.’ . . . And she thought I was someone named Gloria.”

She pulled out her phone and texted her dad: **Do you remember some relative called Gloria Greevey? About the same age as Ree’s grandma?**

She could see that Dad was typing a reply, but he texted like a typical adult—way too slowly.

Finally the words appeared: **You mean your grandfather’s older sister? The one who died when he was just a kid? I’ve told you about that tragedy. She died on her honeymoon.**

How was Nevaeh supposed to keep straight all the family stories Dad told?

Dad added another line: **Only Greevey I ever heard of who was buried in a mausoleum.**

A few seconds later, Dad also texted, **Where are you? Why do you ask?**

But Nevaeh didn’t bother answering.

“Is there any way to get into that mausoleum?” she asked Ree and Colin.

All three of them directed their phone flashlights toward the limestone structure. Nevaeh hadn't actually looked at it very closely the day before. It had imposing pillars at the front. And beyond that . . .

Colin gasped.

"Ree, did you know this mausoleum belonged to your grandmother's family?"

"What are you talking about?" Ree asked.

Colin directed his flashlight beam higher, toward the peak of the mausoleum's roof. A half circle of letters was carved there, in a spot Nevaeh hadn't even glanced at before:

LESTER

Ree took off running for the door.

Lost and Found—and Hidden

“If it’s locked, we can call the police and have *them* break in for us,” Colin said. “We can explain, and then—”

But Ree was already turning the knob, shoving the door open.

It wasn’t locked at all.

Colin and Nevaeh rushed after her.

“Grandma?” Ree called plaintively. “Grandma Hal, are you in there?”

There was no answer.

But the three kids kept going, facing solid darkness ahead of them. All three of them jerked their phones around, sending the flashlight beams spinning around a small enclosure with names on the wall across from them—names of generation after generation of Lesters. And then Ree stopped her flashlight beam on a cracked piece of marble that seemed to be pulled out from the wall.

Or maybe it had fallen, toppling to the floor.

Maybe that had just happened today.

Colin shone his flashlight beam behind the broken marble slab, where he saw a flicker of blue on the ground.

“Grandma!” Ree screamed. “We found you!”

She ran to her grandmother’s side.

Please let her still be breathing, Colin thought. Please let her still be alive. . . .

“Ree?” the old woman murmured, her eyelids fluttering. “Or is that Harmony? Where am I? What happened?”

Colin couldn’t hear what Ree told her grandmother because Nevaeh was crying out, “Look—her leg’s bleeding! And her head. Did that marble slab fall and hit her? Does she need an ambulance?”

And then Nevaeh was busy calling for help and letting everyone else know Ree's grandmother had been found. Ree was all but sobbing over her grandmother, "You're okay, you're okay, everything's going to be okay. . . ."

There was nothing left for Colin to do to help.

So he could sit there wondering, *Why did Ree's grandmother come here tonight? What was so important about seeing this mausoleum?*

He aimed his flashlight at the cracked marble slab on the floor beside Grandma Hal. Had it just *happened* to fall, or had Grandma Hal moved it?

He could make out letters in the marble: GLORIA GREE on the first half, and then VEY LESTER on the second half.

"Nevaeh!" Colin cried, bending closer. "Did your relative Gloria Greevey marry someone in Grandma Hal's family?" He saw numbers below the letters. Gloria Greevey Lester had been born in 1940 and died in 1962.

"Huh?" Nevaeh said. She still had her phone to her ear and held a finger up as though she needed to finish that conversation before she could answer Colin.

But Ree's grandmother reached out and grabbed Colin's arm.

"Promised Gloria . . . , " Grandma Hal murmured. "Promised Lois . . . Had to find . . . Took secrets to our graves . . . But last one alive could say . . . I couldn't remember . . ."

Nothing she said made any sense.

And then it did.

"Is she saying there's a secret *in* Gloria's grave?" Colin asked.

Beside him, Nevaeh snorted.

"You can't dig up people's graves without a court order," she muttered. She moved her phone closer to her mouth and immediately added, "No, no, Dad, I wasn't talking to you."

"But what if someone's not actually buried?" Colin asked. "What if their coffin is just behind a marble slab in a mausoleum?"

He shifted his phone to aim the flashlight beam at the wall before them—the spot near the floor where the marble slab was missing.

And that's when he saw the envelope.

Secrets Taken to the Grave

Nevaeh hung up on her father. She took about two seconds to say, “Gotta go, but don’t worry—nothing’s wrong. Or, at least, nothing *else*.” But she wasn’t entirely sure if she’d finished speaking before the call cut off. She was too busy watching Colin. He was pulling a thin, white, water-stained envelope out of a crack behind the broken marble slab.

Or was it really more from . . . between coffins?

Nevaeh turned the flashlight of her phone back on and directed it at the envelope in Colin’s hands. Colin turned it over, and now Nevaeh could make out faint words in frilly handwriting:

For a descendant of Gloria Greevey, Hal Lester, or Lois Taggart. Whoever lives the longest.

“That’s what I was looking for!” Grandma Hal exclaimed. “Thank you, young man!”

She held out her hand as if Colin were someone she’d hired to do her bidding.

But as soon as Colin dropped the envelope into her grasp, Grandma Hal slid it into Ree’s hands instead.

“For you,” Grandma Hal murmured. “You’re the one I wanted to tell.”

“Me?” Ree asked. “Are you sure?” Her voice was tinged with doubt. Outside the main glow of the flashlights, her face stayed dark. “Were you thinking of me, your granddaughter? Or do you want me to give this to my mom—er, your daughter, Harmony? Or are you thinking of yourself when you were my age?”

“You,” Grandma Hal said. “My granddaughter. Serena Elise Lane.”

Ree gasped.

“You remembered!” she whispered. “You’re still in there.”

“I’ll always remember you,” Grandma Hal whispered back. “Even when I forget.”

That made no sense, but Nevaeh completely understood why Ree leaned down and hugged her grandmother’s frail shoulders. Ree was sputtering, “I know, Grandma, I know. I understand now.”

Off in the distance, a siren sounded. It seemed to be getting closer and closer.

“Ree!” Nevaeh whispered urgently. “When the adults and everyone get here . . . how much do you want us to tell? Are you going to show everyone that letter? Before you even know what it says?”

“Here!” Ree thrust the envelope into Nevaeh’s hands. “Read it out loud. Quick!”

Nevaeh fumbled with turning the letter over, pulling out a sheaf of folded pages. She began, “To whom . . . it may concern . . . We, the . . . undersigned, Gloria Greevey, Halcyon Lester, and Lois Taggart . . . do solemnly swear . . .” She took a minute to redirect her phone flashlight more accurately at the ancient pages. She was usually pretty good at deciphering old-fashioned cursive, but this was extra frilly, and the faded ink and water spots didn’t help.

“Sorry,” she told Ree. “It’s kind of hard to read.”

But her words were drowned out by the siren outside, which was overpoweringly loud now. Then it cut off. An adult voice called, “Hello? Anybody in there? Do we have the right place?”

“Yes! Yes! Hurry!” Nevaeh yelled, even as Colin shouted, “You do!” and Ree was hollering, “Please! Come help my grandma!”

Then everything was a scramble, the paramedics rushing in, and Nevaeh, Colin, and Ree having to step out to make room. The paramedics carried Grandma Hal out of the mausoleum on a stretcher. Even in the near-darkness, the large white bandages on her leg and head glowed.

Then, in the bright lights from the ambulance, Grandma Hal’s face looked nearly as pale as the bandages.

“Will she be all right?” Nevaeh asked one of the paramedics, who looked vaguely familiar. Nevaeh was pretty sure the girl was still in high school with Roddy and Prilla. She had “Trainee” written across her name tag.

“I’m . . . not really allowed to say,” the girl said.

That didn’t help.

But then the rest of Ree's family was there, along with lots of other people who had been searching nearby. Ree's mom climbed into the ambulance alongside her mother. Ree ran over before anyone could shut the doors.

"I'm going to the hospital, too," she said. "I'm not leaving Grandma Hal's side."

"Ree—it sounds like she might have to go into surgery right away," Ree's mom said. "They won't let *anyone* go back with her. It's just going to be a long wait. You go home, and I'll call you when—"

"No," Ree said. "I said that wrong. I mean, I'm not leaving *your* side while we're waiting."

Ree's mother opened her arms, and Ree scrambled up into the ambulance and into her mother's hug.

"I think . . . I think they're going to be okay," Nevaeh whispered to Colin as the paramedics shut the doors and the ambulance pulled away. "Regardless of what happens to Ree's grandma."

"But we still have the letter," Colin said. "What are we supposed to do with that?"

Nevaeh had forgotten all about the letter.

Because people are more important than things, she thought. *Because the present is more important than the past.*

But Ree's grandmother had cared so much about the past that she'd endangered herself trying to retrieve this letter—all in order to give it to Ree.

Sometimes the past and the present were so intertwined, it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began.

Nevaeh's phone dinged just then.

"Oh, right, Dad's probably furious that I hung up on him," she muttered.

She did indeed have six missed texts from her dad and missed calls from Dad, Mom, Prilla, and even Dalton. Somehow she'd been too distracted to hear any of them. But the newest text was from Ree: **Can you send me a picture of each page of that letter? Then we can all figure out what it says all at once. Together. Just not in the same place.**

Nevaeh wrote back: **On it.**

"She needs your skills, not mine," she told Colin, holding out the letter and her phone.

Colin groaned.

“If anyone’s ever going to be able to read that, we need to get it into better light,” he muttered.

Nevaeh saw that Ree’s stepdad was starting to walk toward them. He had that look on his face that adults got when they were about to offer you a ride.

“You need to be fast, not perfect,” Nevaeh countered.

Colin sighed, but he quickly turned his back on Ree’s family and began snapping pictures as Nevaeh held the pages for him. He’d evidently set the phone to use the flash, because the bright light illuminated everything. *Snap!* Page one. *Snap!* Page two. *Snap!*

The sudden glow seemed to burn the words at the top of the third page into Nevaeh’s eyes, and she gasped.

“Colin!” she cried. “Do you see that?”

Her hand shook as she pointed. Colin squinted in puzzlement. So she had to tell him:

“This says they all lied. All three families. The Greeveys, the Lesters, and the Taggarts. They did it to protect the dead boys in 1930. Because . . . we were right! One of them was still alive!”

Colin, Disobeying

It's a terrible thing to have to be polite.

All Colin wanted to do was sit down with Nevaeh and read every word of the letter. But he barely had time to take the last photo—and text it to Ree—before Ree's stepdad was there beside them. To Colin's surprise, Mr. Rhodes wrapped both Nevaeh and Colin into a huge hug.

"You two . . .," he murmured. "I don't know how you and Ree knew to find Grandma Hal, but we are so, so grateful. Did Ree tell you her grandmother was on blood thinner? She could have bled to death if you kids hadn't found her in time. You saved her life."

Colin jolted. His father dying, Ree's grandmother almost dying . . . he didn't like to think about death lurking nearby.

It didn't help that they were still standing in a cemetery.

"We . . . we're grateful, too," he stammered.

After that, he left it to Nevaeh to do the talking. He thought she'd negotiate it so that the two of them could end up someplace together to puzzle out the letter, texting back and forth with Ree constantly. But somehow Mom and Nevaeh's parents showed up together just then, all of them wanting to hug Colin and Nevaeh all over again.

"Oh, come on—*our* lives were never in danger," he heard Nevaeh protest as both her parents nearly smothered her with hugs.

"You've got to let us be sentimental sometimes," Nevaeh's dad argued, doubling down on the hug. "That was a long search, and we were all braced for the worst."

"We're so proud of you that the worst didn't happen," Colin's mom whispered in his ear. "My son, the hero."

“And now it’s time for the heroes to go home,” Nevaeh’s mom said with a yawn.

“But Nevaeh and I—we need to—” Colin began desperately.

“In the morning,” Mom said, even as Nevaeh’s dad said, “Tomorrow.”

Nevaeh’s mom laughed.

“Wow,” she said. “You know it’s a miraculous night when the two of you are one hundred percent in agreement.”

Nevaeh’s dad tried to fist-bump Mom, and it almost worked. Behind the parents’ backs, Nevaeh disentangled herself from her parents’ hugs and motioned to Colin, pointing at her phone and then waving her fingers as if she were texting.

In the car, Colin got a text from Nevaeh that said, **We’ll figure this out even if we have to stay up all night!**

But as soon as Colin and his mom got home, she took his phone as she always did, to charge it out in the kitchen.

“Mom, it’s Friday night. It’s summertime. I was just a hero. Can’t I play on my phone a little bit before I go to sleep?” Colin asked.

Mom kissed his forehead in a way that made him feel like a little kid. Even though she had to stand on tiptoes and bend his head down to do it.

“You know the rules about electronics at bedtime,” she said. “If you’re not sleepy yet, read a book. Or do something else nonelectronic.”

“But *everything’s* electronic,” Colin argued. “Even books.”

Mom tousled his hair.

“Come on, Colin. It’s been a hard week. We’re both tired. Let’s save this fight for another time, okay?”

Mom went to bed, and Colin pretended to. But he really only sat on the edge of his bed waiting. Their house was small enough that, if he listened closely, he could tell when Mom stopped tossing and turning and when he thought she’d actually fallen asleep.

And then he crept back out to the kitchen.

Mom just doesn’t understand, he told himself. *She wouldn’t even if I tried to explain.*

He bent over his phone at the kitchen counter. He already had multiple texts from Nevaeh.

The newest one—the one he saw first—almost made him drop his phone.

We were wrong! Nevaeh had texted. **There were TWO letters in that envelope! One from Grandma Hal and her friends. The other**

Nevaeh must have gotten excited and hit Send too soon. But even as Colin watched, the rest of the message appeared on his screen:

The other was from the ghost boy.

The twin who lived, I mean.

Nevaeh, Alone—or Not.

“Come on! Somebody! Answer!” Nevaeh muttered. She pounded a fist against the couch she was lying on, and a puff of dust rose into the air.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, Nevaeh thought, and shivered.

When she’d gotten home and managed to escape her parents, it had seemed like a great idea to rush out to her family’s barn to hide and secretly read the contents of the envelope she and her friends had found in the cemetery. Her dad kept a lot of old furniture he hadn’t managed to sell yet in this barn; she’d had her choice of battered-but-still-comfortable couches to snuggle into.

But she’d also expected to text back and forth with Colin and Ree as she read. She’d expected it to feel like they were all still working on this together.

She guessed it made sense that Ree would be busy with her grandmother. Or maybe having some long talk with her mom about why she’d lied and hid.

And Nevaeh *knew* that Colin’s mom always made him leave his phone outside his bedroom at night so he wouldn’t get addicted to it or anything. Nevaeh just hadn’t thought that rule would apply tonight.

Lucky me, being the fifth kid in my family—my parents gave up on keeping me safe from cell phones a long time ago! Nevaeh thought ruefully.

Her parents didn’t even worry about her being out in a creepy old barn in the middle of the night.

It had never before seemed as creepy as it did tonight, as she lay there holding a letter from three girls from the 1950s—and a second letter written in 1952 by someone who was supposed to have died in 1930.

“Ghost boy?” she whispered. “Are *you* there? Either one of you? Or . . . Gloria or Lois?”

She didn’t know what she expected as an answer. An eerie voice whispering back from the darkness around her? A string of words suddenly appearing on her phone screen—words that came from neither Ree nor Colin, but the Great Beyond?

None of that happened. The only words on her phone screen were ones she’d written herself, to friends who didn’t reply. The only sound she heard was the whir of summer insects outside the barn, crickets and cicadas and katydids chirping and buzzing and sawing away as if they were all so happy to be alive—and as if none of them knew they’d be dead by first frost.

I’m being silly, Nevaeh told herself. *I don’t believe in ghosts.*

But she didn’t feel silly. Whether she believed in ghosts or not, Russell, Warren, Gloria, Lois, and the kid version of Ree’s grandmother seemed real to her now. She could feel them there with her, just by holding the letters in her hand.

If you’re too creeped out, you can wait until morning, she told herself. *You can wait and read all of this with Colin and Ree. Just like you wanted.*

So far she’d only glanced at the beginning of each letter—maybe that was enough for now.

But she could feel *something* pulling her deeper.

She dropped her phone to the ground, and bent her head over the first letter.

We, the undersigned, Gloria Greevey, Halcyon Lester, and Lois Taggart, do solemnly swear not to tell anyone this story as long as it puts Russell Null or anyone else in danger. . . .

So it truly was Russell, not Warren, who’d lived. But why would he be in danger?

She went back to the letter. After just a few more lines, she felt more comfortable with the fancy cursive. She could figure it out faster and faster. But she was starting to get annoyed with the three girls. They were all so formal—it was like they were trying to sound like lawyers or whoever had written the Groveview Lifesavers certificate.

Then she came across the word “swell” and giggled.

Oh, right, she thought. They were just kids. Like me. Only, with old-fashioned slang. They were trying to sound important, but it didn't always work.

After the “solemnly swear” part, the next few paragraphs were about the same details Nevaeh and Colin had found online and in the *Groveview during the Great Depression* book. But the tale sounded different the way the three girls told it:

Every child in Groveview grows up hearing the story of Russell and Warren Null. It's always the reason parents give for why we aren't allowed to play on the railroad tracks. We're not even permitted to put pennies on the tracks to be flattened by the trains rushing by. Lois's dad is the worst for scolding us: “Do you want to wind up dead and frozen stiff in Old Abner Dell's fields? Do you want his hunting dogs to find your body? Don't you remember what happened to those boys back in 1930?”

But Russell and Warren weren't playing. They were running for their lives.

Nevaeh jerked back. What did *that* mean? And how would Gloria, Lois, and the kid version of Grandma Hal have known that, when they weren't even alive yet in 1930?

When she went back to reading, she saw that the handwriting was different in the next section:

This is Lois now—my father is not the worst. It's just that he actually saw what Warren's body looked like after he fell from the train. Father was the one who had to make Warren's body look presentable for the grieving family. Father was so certain there would be a grieving family who showed up to claim him. Father was also the one who took the pictures for the newspaper (after Warren was embalmed and looking peaceful, in repose in his coffin). But Father says it was hard to smooth the look of worry from Warren's brow. Father wasn't used to such a look on a child's face. He says that haunts him still. And it's been more than twenty years since they buried Warren.

Twenty years, Nevaeh thought. That confirmed the timing, the gap between the twin boys and the girls who wrote the letter.

But the story we knew as little children—the one we heard repeated in the schoolyard and on the playground and, yes, beside the train tracks, when we disobeyed our parents and took dares to walk the rails (don't tell)—that story never sounded quite . . . true. It sounded like a legend, a myth, a tale the adults made up just to get us to behave. Father would never quite answer when I asked, "Did the second boy, Russell, have the same look of worry?" And, "If they were identical twins, how did you know which one was Russell and which one was Warren?"

The writing changed a third time after that:

This is Gloria now—Lois is taking forever to get to the point. She's also trying to make us sound smarter than we really were. Hal and I never doubted the story of Russell and Warren! Well, except for when we added extra details ourselves. I myself remember telling my younger brother that when the second boy's body was found, he had his arm outstretched, like he was reaching for his dead brother . . . I mean, it could have been!

Nevaeh almost laughed. Gloria Greevey sounded like Dad—he was always adding extra details to the stories he told, too.

Except, it turned out that our parents were lying, too. Our parents! And grandparents! All three families! Golly, who knew that they had it in them to lie and deceive everyone—even the newspapermen—and keep a secret for more than twenty years? Because only one boy died. The other boy crawled away and hid in my family's junkyard. Until my father found him, shivering and feverish and delirious, and moaning about how he couldn't be sent back to Mr. Shade, he just couldn't. He'd rather die first. So my father, who was just a boy himself then, at least got Russell to move into the barn, and

The barn, Nevaeh thought. The Greevey barn beside what used to be the Greevey junkyard . . .

Shivers crept up and down her spine. The barn Gloria Greevey had written about all those years ago had to be the very barn she was in right now.

“Russell?” she whispered.

For just a second, it felt like the cicadas and crickets and katydids outside fell silent. Or maybe Nevaeh’s hearing blanked out for an instant. She was no longer thinking about ghosts. Not in a fearful way, anyway. Russell Null just felt so close. For all Nevaeh knew, he might have lain in this very same spot, on some earlier couch one of her ancestors had rescued.

Nevaeh rushed ahead to the bottom of the page, where Gloria’s sprawling writing said:

But we should let Russell himself tell the story, in the letter he sent my grandparents, which they actually let me keep.

The top of the next page was different writing yet again, more like chicken scratching than frilly cursive:

October 27, 1952

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Greevey,

If you remember me at all, it would be as a sick, cowardly, sobbing boy grieving the loss of his brother. I do not believe that I acquitted myself well during my time in your fair town. My memory of October 27, 1930, is a nightmare: seeing my brother Warren fall through the open door of the boxcar as the train rounded a corner, jumping after him in terror of being separated. . . . And then we were separated: one of us dead; one of us still alive—though barely. We were twins and orphans. It had always only been him and me, me and him. We told ourselves we could stand anything, as long as we were together.

Without my brother, I was lost.

We neither one of us had eaten in three days. The only water we’d drunk had come from a hog trough, and it made us puke and gave us the runs. Perhaps that is why I don’t remember finding my

way to your junkyard. I don't remember huddling in the old Ford Model T, taken apart for scrap, where your son told me he found me. I don't remember refusing to go into your house. But I do remember waking up to Mrs. Greevey feeding me soup and tucking warm blankets around me. I was not used to such kindness from any adult, let alone a stranger, and so surely you can understand why it took me so long to believe I was still on earth.

You could have dismissed me as just another tramp, just another vagrant youth preying on the resources of your small town. You could have shipped me right away to the county orphanage or the county jail, and let me be somebody else's problem. But you heeded my pleas to keep me secret. You and your family nursed me back to health. And then, when I kept waking at night screaming about Mr. Shade beating me, screaming about how terrified I was that he'd find me and make me go back and work for him again, you and your friends came up with an ingenious plan to keep me safe.

I remember you saying, "We will make this Luther Shade think that you are dead, too, just like your brother. We will keep your secret forever. You can go to California—our friends have relatives there who will let you live with them and find you a job." I remember posing for the pictures Mr. Taggart took, lying one last time beside my brother. Even if it was inside a coffin. I remember watching Mrs. Taggart put copies of the newspaper clipping about "our" death in envelopes to go out to other funeral homes around the state—but especially up north, where Warren and I would be recognized. I remember Mrs. Lester putting me on the train to California—this time as a paying customer, with a ticket that your family and the others bought for me.

I am ashamed that I did not stay with the Lesters' relatives for long, because I still feared that Mr. Shade could find me, even there. I am ashamed that I never once, in twenty-two years, wrote to let you know that I was okay. More than that—I am ashamed that I never wrote to you, because what I have done since you saved my life might have made you proud. And the more I think on it, the more I believe you deserve to know. You and the Lesters and the Taggarts deserve the credit for everything good I have managed to do in the past twenty-two years, everything I have managed to

become. I would have died without you; you, not I, deserve every honor that's come my way. So I want to share one more secret with you—a happy one this time. I want to come and visit and show you.

Nevaeh turned the page breathlessly, lost in Russell Null's words, lost in his world.

But the next page was completely covered in water spots—and maybe mold, too. If there had ever been words on it, they'd been washed away, eaten away, destroyed.

Nevaeh couldn't read any of it.

Colin and His Mom

Colin read the whole chain of Nevaeh's texts before replying, **Hello? Hello? I'm here now—what do you mean, a letter from one of the ghost boys?**

But Nevaeh didn't answer. Neither did Ree. Reluctantly, Colin turned his attention to the pictures he'd taken of the letters. He had to enlarge everything on his phone and read only a half line at a time. He'd just gotten to the top of the last page when a text from Nevaeh finally popped up on his screen:

Colin! I didn't see your texts because I was reading the letters. I'm so glad you're still awake!

Did you keep one of the pages from the envelope we found in the mausoleum? Before you took a picture of it?

Did you maybe tuck it into your pocket when the adults came over, and we were trying to distract them?

PLEASE tell me you still have another page!

Colin toggled back and forth between Nevaeh's texts and the last picture on his phone before answering:

No, I don't have another page. But do you have any pages I missed taking pictures of?

Or did I accidentally take a picture of the back instead of the front of the last page?

It's so blurry I can't see any words!

Nevaeh's answer was quick: **There aren't any words on the last page! At least, not any I can read. It's all water spots. And, like, mold.**

Colin's heart sank. **But how will we ever find out Russell's second secret?** he wrote back.

Nevaeh sent nothing but the sad emoji in reply.

Colin gasped. They'd found out so much. But it wasn't enough. They still hadn't solved the full mystery. They might never know what Russell had wanted, back in 1952—or what his “happy” second secret might be.

Just then Colin heard a click, and the room around him flooded with light. Colin raised his head to see Mom far down the hall, standing by the light switch. She was tying a belt around a thick white robe that seemed to swallow her up.

Even at that distance, Colin could see the depth of her frown, the disappointment in her eyes.

“Oh, Colin,” she said.

That was all, but it was worse than if she'd screamed at him. It was worse than if she'd accused, *I thought I could trust you. You know you aren't supposed to be looking at your phone right now. What else have you done to disobey that I don't know about?* Or if she'd complained, *Don't you remember what a hard week it's been for me?* Or even said, *Is this a sign that you're turning into someone like your dad—a bad person?*

No, that wasn't true. Having her accuse him of being like his dad would be the worst thing of all.

Colin gulped.

“I was just . . . checking something really fast,” he said. “Something about Ree's grandmother. I thought . . . maybe there was news.”

Mom's frown turned sympathetic. She came over and hugged his shoulders from behind.

“I'm too hard on you sometimes, aren't I?” she asked. She pulled out a chair and sat down beside him at the kitchen table. “Of course you're concerned about Ree's grandmother.”

And then Colin felt guilty for using Ree's grandmother as an excuse.

“It wasn't just that,” he admitted. “I thought there might be texts from Nevaeh.”

Mom raised an eyebrow.

“You two have been spending a lot of time together lately,” she said. It sounded like she was trying to keep her voice neutral. “Are the two of you . . . what do you kids call it nowadays? Is ‘boyfriend and girlfriend’ still the right term? Are you, uh, going together?”

“Mom!” Colin protested. “We're *friends*! That's what it's called! Boys and girls can be friends without it being anything romantic!”

"I know, I know." A wistful look came over Mom's face. "But I was twelve the first time I thought I'd fallen in love."

Colin felt the edges of his phone cutting into his hand.

"With Dad?" he asked.

"No, no," Mom said. "Just a boy in my science class. . . . I got a crush on him, and that meant I was too terrified to ever speak to him again." She shook her head, a tiny smile playing over her lips. "So weird to think you're the same age I was then. . . . It's happening, isn't it?"

"Me falling in love with someone? No," Colin said. He bit back angry words he didn't want to say: *You haven't exactly made falling in love seem like something I'd want.*

"No," Mom said. "I mean—you're the age when friends become as important or more important than family. The past twelve years, I've always thought it was you and me against the world, and that was enough. But that's not enough for you anymore, is it?"

Colin could have said, *It was never enough*, and that would have been true.

He could have said, *It's not fair that you're the only family I have, while people like Nevaeh have a billion relatives who love them.*

He could have even told her about the funeral his friends had arranged that night and how friends could feel like family.

But what he said, without even thinking about it, was, "What if you die? What if I'm left alone?"

It was because he still had the words of Russell's letter echoing in his head: *It had always only been him and me, me and him . . .*

Mom was right: Colin's whole life had always only been him and Mom, Mom and him.

Until this summer.

"Are you really worried about *that*?" Mom asked. "You shouldn't be—I'm perfectly healthy."

"People have accidents," Colin said stubbornly. "Things happen."

"I see—you're thinking about this because of your father," Mom said. She held up her right hand, as if she was taking a solemn vow. "I promise, to the extent that I have any control over it, I intend to live as long as possible. I'm doing everything I can to make sure that you'll be an old man with gray hair by the time I do die. But, trust me, I've written a will. I've made arrangements that would kick in, if need be. I can't even stand

to have the shoes in my closet out of order—you know I'd take care of *you*, no matter what. Because you're more valuable to me than anything. You don't need to know all the details of what would happen, do you?"

It was on the tip of Colin's tongue to say yes. But just then, his phone dinged with another text.

This one wasn't from Nevaeh. It was from Ree:

Thank you, thank you, thank you, she wrote. **Grandma, Mom, and me—I think we've figured out Russell Null's second secret. Can you two come to the hospital first thing tomorrow morning?**

Ghostly Smiles

Ree was waiting in the hospital lobby when Nevaeh and Colin walked in the next morning. Her eyes were puffy, and her face was pale—she looked like she might not have slept all night.

But she grinned as soon as Nevaeh and Colin stepped through the door.

“You two!” Ree exclaimed, surprising them with a hug. “You’re, like, next-generation Groveview Lifesavers!”

“Don’t you mean fourth or fifth generation?” Colin asked. “Since it was Nevaeh’s great-grandfather and her great-great-grandparents who helped Russell Null. And”—he shrugged—“none of my ancestors were involved back in 1930. Not as far as I know.”

Did that bother Colin? Nevaeh couldn’t quite tell.

“Well, you both deserve giant medals that say ‘Groveview Lifesavers’ for helping me find Grandma Hal last night,” Ree said. To Nevaeh’s surprise, Ree opened her hand to reveal one of the ancient-looking medals. She held it out to Colin. “Here. This is the one that belonged to the Taggarts. They’re not around anymore to claim it, so now it’s yours.”

“I—thank you,” Colin said. “That’s . . . I never expected . . .”

Nevaeh had rarely seen Colin so tongue-tied. And she’d seen him tongue-tied *a lot*.

It was possible that he even had tears in his eyes now.

“Ree, I thought you were at the hospital all night with your grandma and mom,” Nevaeh said, trying to cover for him. She knew Colin wouldn’t want Ree to see those tears. “But you still had time to go home and get that medal for Colin? And change your clothes, I guess . . .”

For the first time, it registered with Nevaeh that Ree wasn’t still wearing the purple dress from the night before. She had on an absolutely

normal T-shirt and shorts.

“I’m lucky enough to have a brother who has his driver’s license already,” Ree said. Her grin was even wider now. “And a little sister who knows as much as I do about what’s in our attic. And they were both as worried about Grandma Hal as I was. I could have asked for *anything*, and they would have brought it to us!”

Nevaeh noticed that this was the first time she’d heard Ree refer to Ben and Melanie as just “brother and sister” without the word “step” at the beginning.

“I’m sorry I don’t have an extra medal for you,” Ree told Nevaeh. “But your family already has the one from all those decades ago. So you can just tell people it’s doubly yours.”

“That’s fine,” Nevaeh said, even though she felt the tiniest stab of jealousy that Colin had a medal that was all his, while she had to share hers with ancestors and relatives she’d never even met. So typical.

But Nevaeh was used to hand-me-downs.

And she hadn’t rushed to find Grandma Hal because she’d expected to earn a medal.

“How *is* your grandma doing?” Nevaeh asked.

The grin slipped from Ree’s face.

“Her leg’s broken,” she said. “She’ll have to wear a cast for a long time. And that means . . .” Ree seemed to be trying very hard to keep her voice steady. “When she leaves the hospital, she’ll have to go to a nursing home.”

The situation Ree was trying to prevent all along, Nevaeh thought.

“I’m sorry,” Colin said.

Nevaeh was still trying to think of a way to help Ree out.

“But maybe if—” she began.

Ree shook her head.

“Can we go sit down?” she asked. “There’s a lot I have to tell you before we go up to Grandma’s room.”

They went over to a small alcove with a set of couches and chairs arranged around a coffee table that contained not one, not two, but three separate boxes of Kleenex.

Oh, right, Nevaeh thought. *Because this is probably where doctors deliver bad news. . . .*

“You don’t have to tell us anything you don’t want to,” Nevaeh told Ree.

“No, no, I *want* to,” Ree said. She folded her hands in her lap and took a deep breath. “Mom says it was wrong of me to expect you two and Melanie and Ben to keep my secret. The one about hiding in the attic when I was supposed to be staying with my grandparents. It was wrong of me, too, not to tell anyone that Grandma Hal had started trying to wander away. And . . . it was wrong of me to think that I was the only one who knew what was right for Grandma Hal.”

“But you were wrong for good reasons,” Colin said.

“And you weren’t *trying* to do anything wrong,” Nevaeh agreed.

Ree waved her hands as if she were erasing their objections.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I agree with Mom now about all that. But! I told her it was wrong of her to send me away from Grandma Hal and the rest of the family and keep secrets from me. And she actually agreed about that.”

“Oh, well . . .,” Nevaeh began.

“It’s good when parents admit they can be wrong, too,” Colin said.

“Mom and I had hours and hours and hours to talk last night,” Ree said. “She told me the plan all along was for Grandma Hal to go into a memory care facility before the end of the summer. Mom just . . . didn’t want to have to deal with Grandma Hal and me both being upset at the same time. She thought it would help all three of us if I was far away while Grandma Hal needed to adjust to a new home. But then the timing for when Grandma Hal could move kept getting pushed back. . . . Mom admitted last night that the whole time she was mostly just thinking about what *she* could cope with, what she could handle. Because all this has been hard for her, too. Especially on top of getting married again and trying to start a new business.”

“Wait—what?” Nevaeh joked. “Parents are human, too?”

She saw Colin rub his hand across his face, as if he needed to hide again. Ree gritted her teeth.

Maybe this wasn’t something either of them was ready to joke about.

“Mom and me . . . we were able to talk with Grandma Hal last night, too,” Ree said. “I mean, really talk. Or maybe I should say . . . really listen. We hadn’t been listening to Grandma Hal before.”

“How can you say that?” Nevaeh protested. “You were spending your whole summer hiding in an attic to be near your grandmother!”

Ree gulped and looked down at her hands.

“Because I was trying to protect her from . . . from anyone seeing how weird she was sounding, how weird she was acting,” Ree said. “I *wasn’t* listening. Every time she’d bring up the ‘boy’ she’d seen, I’d try to change the subject. Every time she’d bring up something she wanted to tell me before she forgot, I’d try to get her to remember the things *I* thought were important. And Mom says she was doing that, too.”

Nevaeh thought about all the topsy-turvy conversations she’d had with Ree’s grandmother. None of them had made much sense. But each time, the conversation had worked better when Nevaeh played along a little.

And doing that meant that she’d learned enough from Grandma Hal to understand that something about the cemetery was important.

And she’d learned enough that she, Colin, and Ree had been able to find Grandma Hal when she was missing and hurt.

“There’s kind of a special way you have to talk with a person who has dementia,” Ree said. “It’s like using a different language. And Mom and I are going to learn how to do it right. Listening more, correcting less. . . . Not saying, ‘Don’t you remember?’ . . . Mom says that holding on to Grandma for as long as we can isn’t about making sure she lives in the same house with us. It’s about wanting what’s best for her and making sure we stay connected.”

“Even when things weren’t making sense, anyone could tell that you and your grandma and your mom all love each other,” Colin said.

Ree pressed her hands against her heart, as if Colin had given her a gift.

“Mom and Grandma—and my stepdad, too—they say that being around death all the time makes you realize how precious life is,” Ree said. “And Grandma managed to explain something to us last night. She said losing her memory makes her value every memory she still has even more. She wants to share as many of them as she can, while she still can.”

“And that’s why it was important to her to tell you about Russell Null,” Nevaeh whispered.

Ree nodded.

“I think . . . I think if I understood everything right, it was a *big* deal for her and her friends to meet Russell when they were kids.”

“So he did come and visit?” Colin asked. He slid so far forward he almost fell off his chair. “And you know what he showed the Greeveys?”

“Oh yeah.” Ree grinned and sprang to her feet. “Come on. Depending on how Grandma’s feeling right now, she might be able to explain it to you herself.”

Nevaeh and Colin practically ran after Ree to the elevator, and then down a long hall.

“It’s this room,” Ree said, pushing open a wide door. She had to shove back a curtain, too. Ree’s grandmother looked small in the propped-up hospital bed, and she stared strangely at Nevaeh and Colin as if she had no idea who they were. But Ree’s mom leaned close and whispered something in Grandma Hal’s ear, and Grandma Hal’s face lit up with a smile.

“You’re *those* kids!” she exclaimed. “Thank you!”

A large black book—a photo album?—started to slip off the bed. Ree’s mom stopped it from falling.

“Colin and Nevaeh came to see your pictures of the hero, Grandma,” Ree said, crossing the room to put her arm around her grandmother’s shoulders.

“Hero?” Nevaeh asked. “No, we were curious about the ghost boy—er, the boy who survived. The one who *didn’t* become a ghost. Er—”

“The boy is the man,” Grandma Hal said. “The man is the hero.”

Okay, that was as clear as mud, Nevaeh thought.

But Colin went over to peer down at the pictures in the album Ree’s mom held out to them, and Nevaeh followed. Ree’s mom took a step back, leaving Ree, Colin, and Nevaeh to hunch over the photo album with Grandma Hal.

“These are the important ones,” Ree said, pointing to three photos at the top of a page.

“People didn’t have digital photography back in the fifties, so it was a big deal to take more than one picture of anything, right, Mom?” Ree’s mother asked in a gentle voice.

“It was a big deal to take a picture, period,” Grandma Hal said. “You only took pictures of things you really wanted to remember.”

The first picture was of some guy in a military uniform, holding up a heart-shaped piece of jewelry on a ribbon, along with one that was star-shaped. Or maybe they were medals?

“Oh, a Purple Heart,” Nevaeh said knowingly. Once again, all the History Channel specials her dad had made her watch were paying off. “And . . . is that a Congressional Medal of Honor?”

“He was so brave,” Grandma Hal whispered. “Biggest hero I ever met.”

“He saved . . . sixty lives?” Colin asked, putting his finger on a line of faded words below the picture.

Nevaeh was too impatient to decipher any more scrolly cursive from the past. She looked at the second picture, which showed the military man with three girls who all looked to be about Nevaeh’s age.

“Grandma Hal, Lois Taggart . . . and Gloria Greevey,” Ree said, pointing to each girl in turn.

All three girls wore the kind of dresses that would have made Nevaeh hate living in the 1950s. All the dresses had smocked, frilly bodices and puffed-out skirts. Nevaeh knew from trying on old clothes that that kind of skirt had to have scratchy crinolines underneath. All three girls also wore turned-down socks and black-and-white saddle shoes on their feet, and that was a look Nevaeh kind of liked. But what a strange combination.

“Grandma Hal looked like Ree. And Gloria Greevey does look like you, Nevaeh,” Colin said.

It was hard to tell from a black-and-white picture, but Gloria Greevey did seem to have the same wiry, dirty-blond hair as Nevaeh. Otherwise, the resemblance was more from a mischievous twinkle in her eye than any similar features.

“Yeah, yeah, every Greevey looks alike,” Nevaeh muttered.

“Gloria was always such a hoot,” Grandma Hal said. “She could make anything funny. Even just saying hello. Oh, how the three of us laughed when we were together.”

She sounded like she was talking about people she’d just seen yesterday or the day before, not decades ago.

Maybe that was how it felt to Grandma Hal.

“I wish Gloria Greevey hadn’t died so young,” Nevaeh said. Grandma Hal was making her feel all wistful and nostalgic about someone she’d never even met. “I wish *I* could have laughed with her.”

“They’re all dead now,” Grandma Hal said matter-of-factly. “They’re all dead in that picture. Except me.”

“And we’re going to keep you around for a long time,” Ree said, hugging her grandmother’s shoulders.

“And you’re going to listen to me now,” Grandma Hal said. “I can talk about Lois and Gloria. And the hero.”

“We’re all ears,” Ree assured her.

Grandma Hal lifted a shaky finger and pointed to the third picture.

“And I can talk about him, too,” she said.

This picture showed the military man again, and the kid versions of Grandma Hal, Lois, and Gloria again. But there was a fifth person in the picture as well—a boy standing directly in front of the military man, the military man’s hands on his shoulders.

Nevaeh gasped. She recognized that dark hair, those pale features. She couldn’t stop herself from crying out:

“It’s the ghost boy!”

Ghosts Revealed

“That’s impossible,” Colin said. “The ghost boy photos were from 1930. This picture was taken in 1952. It can’t be the same kid.”

“It’s his son,” Ree said.

“Oh, right—Greeveys aren’t the only family where everyone looks alike,” Nevaeh muttered. But she still looked shaken, as though she truly had believed for a moment that she’d been looking at a picture of a ghost.

Colin loved everything about the photo album before him: the way all the pictures were neatly tucked into little black holders lined up to make a square; the way the pages beneath the photos had yellowed with age. The way the photos themselves seemed to be pieces of a time that no longer existed.

So it made him sad to have to point out, “But did you read what it says below these pictures? This is a Lieutenant Neal and his son posing with these girls, not Russell Null. It’s probably just a coincidence that this kid looks like the boys from 1930.”

“That’s the second secret,” Ree said. “The one Lois and Gloria and Grandma Hal wouldn’t even write in their letter. Russell Null changed his name when the Lesters, Taggarts, and Greeveys helped him move to California. He felt like he had to do that so the man he was afraid of, Luther Shade, would never find him. Russell Null became Russell Neal. And then he became a hero during World War II. Even though he was injured himself, he crossed the lines of enemy fire to rescue others who had been hurt, too. He went back again and again and again—more than sixty times.”

Grandma Hal touched the photo of the man posing with his Purple Heart and Congressional Medal of Honor.

“Bravest man I ever met,” she said. “Wasn’t afraid of Nazis. But he was still afraid of Luther Shade.”

And I’m not afraid of ghosts, but I am still afraid of finding out anything else about my father, Colin thought.

“Didn’t you say Russell Neal only dared to come back to Ohio at all because he wanted to thank the people who’d saved *his* life?” Ree’s mom asked.

“He said the medals he won actually belonged to the people from Groveview,” Grandma Hal said. “He said he would have died without their help, and so would the soldiers whose lives he saved. . . .”

“Sixty people who survived, just because the Greeveys, Taggarts, and Lesters helped one boy,” Colin whispered.

“One scared boy who turned out to be brave, after all,” Ree said.

Colin nodded knowingly. He wasn’t used to feeling connected to people. He wasn’t related to the Greeveys, the Taggarts, or the Lesters—it wasn’t *his* ancestors who’d saved anyone’s life. But he felt connected to this hero from World War II because Colin had helped Ree and Nevaeh figure out the man’s story. And because he’d helped Grandma Hal find a way to share her memories with her daughter and granddaughter.

And he’d helped save Grandma Hal’s life.

He thought about what Prilla had said at the sort-of funeral for Colin’s dad, how she’d argued with the William Shakespeare quote about evil, not good, living on after someone died.

In this case, Prilla was right, Colin thought. The good lived on.

“So . . . who has Lieutenant Neal’s military medals now?” Nevaeh asked.

“My jewelry box does,” Grandma Hal said, waving her hand. “That’s why I wanted my jewelry box.”

Ree and her mom both frowned the exact same way, as though they were both so sorry to disappoint Grandma Hal.

“No, Mom, remember, we looked already, and there weren’t any military medals in there,” Ree’s mother said.

Ree elbowed her and whispered, “We’re not supposed to say ‘remember,’ to Grandma. Remember?”

“Bring it to me,” Grandma Hal said, as if she hadn’t heard either one of them.

“Is this it?” Colin asked, picking up a wooden chest on the window ledge.

“Oh!” Nevaeh said, bolting upright. “That’s just like one my dad sold to an antique dealer a month ago. He made me go through it and make sure there weren’t any, like, pearl earrings hidden in some secret compartment.”

“You’re right! It has a secret compartment!” Grandma Hal exclaimed. “That’s what I’ve been trying to remember!”

Colin handed Nevaeh the jewelry box instead of giving it to Grandma Hal.

“If this really is the same, then . . . ,” Nevaeh muttered even as she felt along the underside of the wooden chest. “Yes!” She must have hit some kind of a hidden release because a panel opened at the bottom.

Seconds later, she pulled out a thick medal labeled “Groveview Lifesaver.”

“So that’s where our family’s version of that medal was!” Ree exclaimed.

Nevaeh gave it to Ree, and Ree clutched it to her chest.

“Keep looking,” Grandma Hal said.

Nevaeh reached farther into the secret compartment. This time she pulled out two military medals on faded ribbons: a heart and a star. Colin was certain they had to be the same ones as in the picture from 1952.

The medals were pinned to a piece of paper full of more of the old-fashioned cursive. Colin read it over Nevaeh’s shoulder:

We the undersigned do solemnly swear that we will instruct our heirs to give these medals back to the descendants of Lieutenant Russell Neal once the last one of us has passed away.

Sincerely,

Gloria Greevey, Halcyon Lester, Lois Taggart

“And that’s why I was supposed to remember!” Grandma Hal exclaimed. “Lieutenant Neal wanted us to have these medals, but it made his son sad because he wanted them himself. He was so proud of his dad. Lois and Gloria and I, we didn’t want to disobey. But we made a deal with Russell Junior. The medals would go back to his family when we died.” She tugged on Ree’s arm. “That’s what you have to do. You have to

promise me. You have to give the medals back.” She frowned, as if she was still trying to remember something. Or . . . changing her mind. “No, wait. Can you do it now? When I can see how happy it makes Russell Junior?”

Ree and her mother both had tears in their eyes. But only Ree seemed to be able to choke out an answer: “Of course, Grandma. Of course.”

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Zoom

Nevaeh and Colin were back at the funeral home.

“If you’d told me at the beginning of the summer how many times I’d end up here, I never would have believed you,” Nevaeh said as they stepped up to the front door.

“That’s just because if I’d told you anything at the beginning of the summer, you would have said, ‘Who are you?’” Colin reminded her.

“Oh, yeah,” Nevaeh said.

It felt like she’d known Colin forever. But it really had been only two months.

If it’s hard for me to remember just back to the beginning of the summer, no wonder Ree’s grandmother has trouble remembering things from being alive for more than eighty years, Nevaeh thought.

“Anyhow, this is our *least* creepy trip to the funeral home so far,” Colin said.

Ree opened the front door for them even before they could knock or ring the doorbell. She’d clearly been waiting.

“Grandma and Mom are already in front of the laptop,” she said. Then she added in a whisper, “And Grandma’s having a great day!”

This seemed especially true when they walked into the front room, and Grandma Hal immediately greeted them by name: “Nevaeh! Colin! Thank you so much for finding the hero’s family!”

“It wasn’t that hard,” Colin said.

Nevaeh knew he was being modest. They’d had to check military records and birth and death records and obituaries from way out in California. It had taken them days.

But they'd also been lucky. Even though Russell Null—who later became Lieutenant Russell Neal—had died years ago, his son was still alive and healthy.

And Russell Neal Jr. was eager to talk to the grown-up version of a girl he'd met in 1952.

"Eleven a.m. here, eight a.m. in California . . . it's time to start this Zoom call," Ree's mom said, typing quickly on the laptop balanced on a table in front of Grandma Hal.

Grandma Hal was in a wheelchair, her broken leg still in a cast. And she was only visiting the funeral home, because she was living full-time in a memory care facility now. But none of that showed on the computer screen. In the square picture on the computer screen, Grandma Hal was still smiling over her shoulder at Nevaeh and Colin.

Ben and Melanie and their dad stepped into the room, too.

"Your tech support's here, if you need it!" Melanie said.

"Looks like everything's working," Ree's mom said as a second black square popped up on the screen.

And then an old man with a shock of white hair was on the screen, grinning back at Grandma Hal.

"Hally!" he said. "You look just like you did in 1952!"

Nevaeh heard Melanie giggle.

"No, no, really!" he said. "I would recognize those eyes anywhere!"

"Russie?" Grandma Hal said, squinting. She appealed to Ree's mother. "I thought you said I could talk to Russie!"

A boy appeared on the screen alongside the old man.

"Russie!" Grandma Hal shouted.

"This is my grandson," the old man, Mr. Neal, said.

"So we each have multiple generations here," Ree's mother said quickly, leaning toward the webcam and drawing Ree forward, too.

"It really doesn't matter which generation anyone recognizes," Mr. Neal said. "It's our two families connecting again."

"The Greevey family is represented here, too," Ree said, pointing over her shoulder toward Nevaeh.

"And the next generation of Groveview Lifesavers," Nevaeh said, hoping that made Colin feel included.

"I can't tell you how grateful I was to hear from your children," Mr. Neal said. He had a deep, gravelly voice that made it hard to think of him

ever having been a little kid. Nevaeh could see why Grandma Hal was peering so intently at the grandson instead. “I remembered visiting Groveview with my dad when I was a kid. But I didn’t remember the name of the town. My father had such an unhappy childhood before he ran away that he never talked about it. He wouldn’t even say the word ‘Ohio.’ All I had to go on was this.”

He held up a battered old photograph that looked like it must have been taken the same time as the ghostly ones from the funeral home attic. In this photo, though, Russell was standing beside his brother’s coffin. Both boys had the same dark hair, the same gaunt faces, the same slight frames. But they were clearly two separate boys. They didn’t even look so identical anymore. Warren lay peacefully in his coffin, while Russell couldn’t be anything but alive. He stood so resolutely, his hand on his brother’s face.

He seemed to be steeling himself to say goodbye.

Nevaeh saw that Colin was peering back and forth between Mr. Neal’s photo and his own phone screen, where he was flipping through the original pictures they’d seen. Those photos were so familiar now. Once she’d learned Russell and Warren’s story, Nevaeh felt like she could see exactly which photos were real and which were accidental double exposures that looked like ghosts—and which showed a dead Warren and a Russell only pretending to be dead. But the photo Mr. Neal held out to them on the computer screen felt like the truest one of all. It showed the rest of the story: perhaps the very moment when Russell realized he could go on without his brother. He would have to. But that would never mean he loved his brother any less.

“As near as I could tell, my father carried this photo in his wallet his entire life,” Mr. Neal said. He wiped the back of his hand across his eyes and cleared his throat. “But it wasn’t until his last few months of life that he began telling me his childhood stories. At the very end, he kept telling me he should have taken better care of his brother, Warren. He’d saved all those lives during World War II, but he hadn’t been able to save his own brother. He felt guilty his entire life. Then he had one request on his deathbed: he wanted me to have Warren’s body moved, so it would be buried right beside his and my mother’s. And—” Mr. Neal looked down, as if he was ashamed. “And I couldn’t carry out his wishes because I no

longer remembered where Warren was buried and didn't know how to find him. And it was too late to ask my dad."

"Grandpa, it's not your fault," the boy standing beside him said. "You didn't even know Warren's last name. That photo was too blurry for any image search, and you didn't have any others. It'd been seventy years since you'd been in Ohio. So how were you supposed to find him?"

"That's why Warren kept telling me to get Ree to help," Grandma Hal said. "That's why Warren started haunting us."

For a second, everyone fell silent, as if nobody knew what to say to that.

Does Grandma Hal really believe the ghost of Warren Null was giving her instructions? Nevaeh wondered. Or is this just another strange thing she's saying only because she has dementia?

"If you really do want to make arrangements to move your uncle's body from the cemetery here in Groveview to a resting place out there in California, we could make that happen," Ree's mom said.

"That is exactly what I want," Mr. Neal said. "That will make it so I can go to my own grave in peace."

"But not for a long time," his grandson said. "Not for a long, long time from now."

The grown-ups started talking about boring grown-up stuff—all the logistics of moving the "ghost boy's" body, all the logistics for sending Lieutenant Russell Neal's military medals to his son.

Nevaeh tugged on Ree's arm.

"Write something in the chat," she said. "Get the grandson's phone number. We might want to talk more to him. And maybe he could text us a copy of that photo."

"Good idea," Ree said.

She bent over the keyboard. Nevaeh saw a number pop up on the screen in reply, and she quickly started typing it into her own phone.

"Wait—we don't even know the grandson's name," Colin said.

Ree typed that question, too.

Nevaeh almost laughed when she saw the answer:

It's Warren.

I bet you can guess who I'm named for.

The Ending—and Another Beginning

LOCAL RESIDENTS SOLVE HERO'S MYSTERIES

Groveview's very own young Sherlock Holmeses are at it again! This time, 12-year-olds Colin Creedmont and Nevaeh Greevey had help from new residents Serena Lane, 12, and Halcyon Keith, 83, in reuniting the family of a World War II hero with the Purple Heart and Congressional Medal of Honor he earned.

The three kids and Mrs. Keith, who grew up in Groveview but moved away as a teenager before returning earlier this year, also unearthed a hidden tale from Groveview history—one that three prominent local families of the 1930s kept secret for decades, out of respect for the young homeless boy who grew up to be that military hero.

Those four Groveview residents are also responsible for solving a mystery for a California man—the son of the military hero—who is now able to follow his father's deathbed wishes to be buried alongside his brother.

"Ugh," Nevaeh groaned, lowering her phone. "It's a good thing no one I know from school ever reads the newspaper. This would make my friends hate me all over again, just when they started talking to me again. 'Groveview's very own young Sherlock Holmeses'? And Greeveys being called 'prominent'? Seriously?"

Nevaeh and Colin had met in front of the library to read the newspaper story together as soon as it was posted, just as they'd done the first time they'd solved a big mystery.

"If your friends aren't proud of you for this," Colin said, "then why are you even friends with them?"

Nevaeh threw up her hands.

“You’re right! You’re right!” she said. “But can’t I be offended just for myself? You have to think that’s cheesy, too!”

“It’s, like, two pounds of cheddar wrapped in four pounds of Swiss,” Colin said.

Nevaeh shrugged.

“I’d eat that,” she said.

That didn’t really make sense, but Colin didn’t mind.

Both of their phones dinged at the same time with a text from Ree:

What a relief! The reporter wasn’t even mean about Grandma Hal’s dementia!

Nevaeh texted back: **Of course she wasn’t! I told you we had nothing to worry about!**

Colin held back a giggle. It was funny that Nevaeh could tell Ree not to be nervous about what people thought, when she’d been nervous herself.

But I was nervous, too, he reminded himself.

He peered at the pictures the paper had used with the story: Mr. Neal’s photo of Russell and Warren Null from way back in 1930; the one from 1952 of Lieutenant Russell Neal, twelve-year-old Russell Neal Jr., twelve-year-old Grandma Hal, and her friends Lois and Gloria—and a current picture of Ree’s whole family clustered around a laptop with a Zoom image of the ancient Mr. Neal and his grandson.

“They didn’t use any of the pictures with us in them,” Nevaeh said.

“Fine by me,” Colin said. “I’d rather take pictures than be in them.”

“And . . . they didn’t say anything about Ree’s grandma seeing ghosts,” Nevaeh said. “So it’s not really an accurate story.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in ghosts,” Colin said.

“I don’t,” Nevaeh said. “Not exactly. But . . . I do believe ‘there are more things in heaven and earth than dreamt of in’ . . . ugh. I can’t remember the rest of the quote Prilla told me. I’ll have to look it up.”

But she didn’t click out of the newspaper story to look up the quote on her phone. Colin didn’t pull his phone out, either.

“Maybe there are just different ways to be haunted,” he said.

“Yeah, it could be that Grandma Hal was seeing an actual ghost, and he was talking to her, telling her to find the medals, telling her to find Russell Neal’s son,” Nevaeh said. She slowed down, choosing her words carefully. “It could be that I felt the ghost’s presence that day in the attic, when I got so freaked out. It could be that I’m . . . sensitive . . . to stuff like that.”

Nevaeh paused, then added quickly, “Or it could be that all the ghost talk was just part of Grandma Hal’s dementia, and I was just acting weird, too. Freaking out.”

“Nevaeh, you *are* sensitive,” Colin said. “I don’t know about anything paranormal, but you’re good at reading people. That’s not weird. It’s *good*. You could tell something strange was going on with Ree. And . . . with me. I’m weird, too, just in different ways. I like taking pictures of broken-down old things—that’s not normal!”

“So what? Everybody’s weird in their own way, I guess,” Nevaeh said, like that was supposed to comfort Colin. She shrugged. “Anyhow, Ree thinks we solved enough of her mystery. Even if we didn’t prove the ghost didn’t exist. I’m okay with some mysteries staying mysteries. It’s kind of more fun that way.”

“With the ghost boy mystery, yes,” Colin said. And then he stopped.

“But?” Nevaeh said after a moment. Because it seemed like that was where he was leading.

Everything was hot and still around them. The top of the newspaper story glowing from Nevaeh’s phone had included the date: August 1. Before the end of this month, the summer would end, and Nevaeh and Colin would both start new schools. They’d stop spending every day in the hot attics and cooler basements of Groveview houses, sorting trash from treasures. After their summer of delving into the past, it felt like their futures were rushing toward them. At the same time, it felt like nothing would ever change. This was a mystery, too—that both feelings were possible at once.

But Colin wanted some things to change.

He took a deep breath.

“I’m ready now,” he said. “Even if Mom isn’t, I need to know more about my dad. It’s time for me to find out what was so terrible about him.”

Nevaeh took an equally deep breath.

“Do you need my help?” she asked.

“I can’t do this without you,” he said.

A breeze kicked up just then. For all Nevaeh and Colin knew, it could have been a ghost boy from almost a century ago signaling his approval. Or it could have been that ghosts didn’t exist, and the breeze was just a breeze. Either way, the breeze felt good on their faces. It felt like a blessing. Or maybe, a promise.

Nevaeh raised her phone, her fingers poised over the screen.
“Then I’m ready, too,” she said.

Author's Note

I was a lucky kid and knew three of my four grandparents well. Both of my grandmothers lived into their nineties, and because I come from a family of storytellers, I always felt like I knew a lot about their lives. But after their deaths, I also found letters they wrote, newspaper articles about them, and mementos they left behind that made me wish I'd asked more questions and paid more attention.

So if you take nothing else from this author's note, please heed this: Seek out and listen to your family's stories. If it's possible, ask your parents and grandparents what their lives were like when they were your age. It may help you understand them better; it may also help you understand more about how they treat *you*. Odds are, they will tell you stories of moments they're ashamed of, as well as moments they're proud of. I can't guarantee you'll learn any intriguing family secrets or hidden family good deeds, like Ree did. But you might.

If you, like Ree, have an elderly relative with dementia, you may need to become a family memory-keeper in a different way. For those who haven't encountered anyone with dementia, here's a little explanation: "Dementia" is the term used for a variety of diseases that affect memory and brain function. The most common form of dementia is Alzheimer's disease, which you probably have heard of. In the early stages of dementia, people might just seem a little forgetful. As the disease progresses, they might get lost even traveling, say, between their home and the grocery store they've always shopped at. They might hallucinate—see and/or hear things that aren't really there. They might lose interest in favorite hobbies and, unless reminded, give up on bathing and showering. Ultimately, they might stop recognizing everyone they know and love.

Dementia is a cruel and horrible disease. In my experience with friends and relatives who have had various forms of dementia, it can feel like

watching a loved one vanish before your eyes. But there can also be moments of grace and new ways to connect. A person with dementia is still a person and will likely still appreciate a visit, a smile, a hug from a grandchild.

If you, like Ree, do have a relative with dementia, I urge you and your family to find out as much as you can about their particular diagnosis and the best ways to help. And, whether you know someone with dementia or not, if you are a kid who likes science, you might want to learn more about the brain and help that way. Currently, there is no cure for Alzheimer's or certain other forms of dementia, only medicines that may or may not slow the progress of the disease. Maybe YOU will be the person who discovers the cure.

But maybe this book left you curious about other topics instead. If so, here's a little information about other subjects you might be wondering about.

The Great Depression

If you haven't already, you will almost certainly study this historic era in school someday. The Great Depression of the 1930s affected people worldwide. In the fall of 1929, stock prices in the United States fell dramatically. Banks failed, factories shut down, and millions of people lost their jobs—and sometimes their homes, too. At the depths of the Depression, the unemployment rate was about 25 percent—meaning that one out of every four people who wanted a job couldn't find one.

To make matters worse, during the 1930s the United States also faced an environmental disaster in the Great Plains known as the Dust Bowl. Without adequate rain, farmers lost their crops. Fields that had once been seen as valuable agricultural land became as worthless as dust—and the choking, swirling dust fed into dangerous storms that darkened the sky as far away as the East Coast. People died from breathing the dust; people died because they didn't have enough food or money to buy food.

But people also showed an amazing will to survive under challenging circumstances. Those who lived through this time period tell stories of both cruelty and compassion, helplessness and hope.

Like Russell and Warren Null, many adults and kids during the Great Depression sought better lives in a new place and turned to the railroads as their route to escape. According to the book *Riding the Rails: Teenagers*

on the Move during the Great Depression, by Errol Lincoln Uys, an estimated 250,000 American teens were wandering as “hobos” during the worst years of the Depression. If you are interested in learning more about individuals who chose or were forced into that life, you can find many of their stories in both the book and a related documentary with the same name. Though some saw riding the rails as a chance for adventure, it was also extremely dangerous. One statistic cited in the book was that between 1929 and 1939, nearly 25,000 railroad “trespassers” were killed, and about 27,000 were injured. Also, arriving in a new destination was no guarantee of better opportunities. Some communities became so overwhelmed with job seekers that they put out discouraging signs with slogans such as “Jobless Men Keep Going—We Can’t Take Care of Our Own.”

Eventually the Great Depression led to numerous governmental safety-net programs, including many that still exist today. However, Warren and Russell didn’t just run away because they were living in a difficult historic era; they were also trying to escape an abusive home life. Sadly, some kids today also grapple with that problem. If you are one of those kids who’s considering running away, please find an adult you can trust—maybe a teacher or a school counselor—and tell them what you are dealing with. Or if you don’t know any adult you feel you can trust, here’s where you can find help: the National Runaway Safeline, which can be reached through an online chat at 1800runaway.org or through their crisis phone line, 1-800-RUNAWAY. Another resource is www.nationalsafeplace.org, which has a network of more than 9,000 “Safe Places.” Kids who need help can text “safe” and their address to 4HELP (44357) to find out the nearest Safe Place address where they can get help.

Funeral Customs

In my descriptions of Ree’s family’s funeral home and its uses, I tried to reflect customs common to small-town Ohio. If you have ever been to a funeral or memorial service for a loved one, your experiences may or may not have been similar, depending on your religious and cultural background. Many people would rather not think about death at all. But it’s an inescapable fact of life, and people like Ree’s parents are there to help guide mourners through their grief.

Many typical American funeral customs have evolved during times of cultural change. Modern embalming techniques were first widely used

during the Civil War, when soldiers died on the battlefield, and families back home wanted to be able to hold a service and bury their loved ones in cemeteries near where they'd lived. Being able to preserve the soldiers' bodies made that possible.

After World War I, grieving families really did form an organization called the Bring Back the Dead League to convince the government to return the bodies of military members killed in battles in Europe. The name probably did not sound as horrifying to people in 1919 as it does now.

In recent years, people have changed some funeral practices because of environmental concerns, as well as concerns about the costs of embalming and burial. More and more, people are choosing cremation—the practice of having a body burned after death, rather than being preserved. The cremation rate in the United States has gone up from less than 6 percent in 1975 to more than 50 percent in 2021. According to the National Funeral Directors Association, the rate is expected to reach nearly 80 percent by 2035.

Other funeral customs changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning in March 2020, many families faced a choice between holding a loved one's memorial service over Zoom or delaying a service for months or even years.

If you have lost a loved one recently, I hope you and your family were able to find a meaningful way to remember them. And I hope the memories you cherish of them become a comfort to you for years to come.

Acknowledgments

As always, I am very grateful to everyone who helped me during the writing of this book.

Back at the beginning, I knew I wanted to write about a girl whose family lived in a funeral home, but my ideas were a little vague. My friend Cheryl Hilty was very generous—and blunt—in describing her own experiences with that situation in small-town Indiana. Her stories gave me a much deeper understanding of what it's like to grow up and live in a family constantly dealing with death, day in and day out.

Unfortunately, I have plenty of experience myself in dealing with friends and family members with dementia. But as I wrote about Ree and her grandmother, I also drew comfort and inspiration from stories shared by several friends who have had or are currently caring for relatives with Alzheimer's disease or similar issues. Extra hugs and thanks to Rich Bowling, Cheryl Bruney, Mary and Jeff Jones, Ellen and Ken Kus, Scarlett LaCava, Julia Wharff Piermont, Jim Ullman, and Susan Zaffiro. And a special shout-out to my husband, father, siblings, in-laws, nieces, and nephews for navigating the challenges we've had to face together, dealing with other relatives' illnesses. My family is not quite as large as Nevaeh's, but I am just as grateful.

I also greatly appreciate the help I got from Bonnie Burman, president of the Ohio Council for Cognitive Health, when I was trying to make sure that I depicted Ree's grandmother both accurately and compassionately.

Two other experts also helped me with various research questions. Ellie Kirchner, lead librarian at the Worthington (Ohio) Libraries, pointed me toward resources available to modern-day kids who, like Russell and Warren back in 1930, might otherwise feel that running away is their only option. And Anne Quinn, head of children's services at Carnegie Public Library in Washington Court House, Ohio, gave me information about

what genealogy and local history resources might be available at my (fictional) small-town Groveview, Ohio, library. Truthfully, I should effusively thank the Carnegie Public Library and its staff in every single one of my books, since I spent so much of my childhood there, and it/they played such an enormous role in making me a writer.

As always, I am grateful to my agent, Tracey Adams, and editor, Katherine Tegen, for all their help in shaping and improving this book. Katherine retired at the end of 2022, so this was the last book we worked on together. I am extremely grateful for the five years we worked together and the many, many ways she made me a better writer. Thank you also to everyone else at HarperCollins who worked on this book in one way or another, including Sara Schonfeld, Ben Rosenthal, Julia Johnson, Kathryn Silsand, Mark Rifkin, Lana Barnes, Molly Fehr, Amy Ryan, Allison Brown, Emily Mannon, Abby Dommert, Patty Rosati, Mimi Rankin, and Stephanie Macy. And thank you to Yas Imamura for the great cover art.

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I also want to acknowledge and honor two real-life World War II heroes whose actions inspired the storied bravery I attributed to Lt. Russell Neal in this book. I read lists of Congressional Medal of Honor winners when I was trying to plot Lt. Neal's heroism and was particularly struck by the stories of Private First Class Harold C. Agerholm, who single-handedly evacuated about forty-five casualties from a battle zone, and Private First Class Desmond T. Doss, a conscientious objector working as a medic who single-handedly evacuated about seventy-five wounded at great risk to himself during the Battle of Okinawa. I especially wanted to add this, in case anyone doubted that the fictional heroics I described might be impossible.

And finally, thank you to everyone reading this book! I hope you will continue to enjoy the adventures of Nevaeh and Colin!

About the Author



Photo credit Cilento Photography

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX has always been fascinated by odd old photos—she always wants to know what the pictures *don't* show! After growing up on a farm in Ohio, Margaret worked as a newspaper reporter and copy editor in Indiana before her first book, *Running Out of Time*, was published. She has since written more than forty books for kids and teens,

including its sequel, *Falling Out of Time*, the Mysteries of Trash and Treasure series, the Greystone Secrets series, the Shadow Children series, the Missing series, the Children of Exile series, *Remarkables*, *The School for Whatnots*, and many other stand-alones. Margaret and her husband, Doug, now live in Columbus, Ohio, where they raised their two kids. You can learn more about her at haddixbooks.com.

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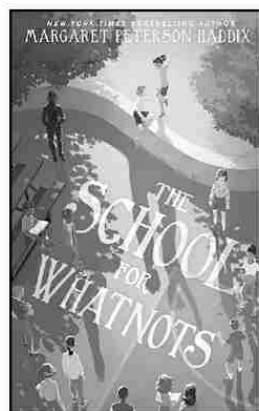
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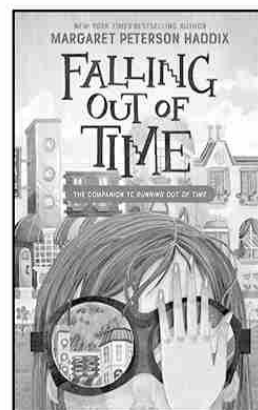
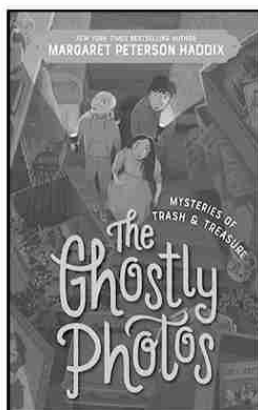
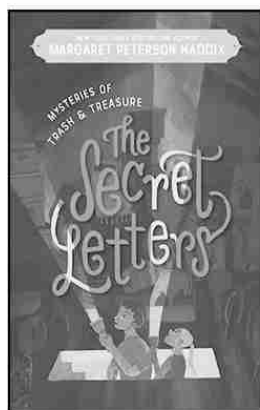
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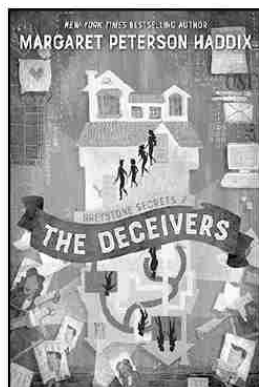
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